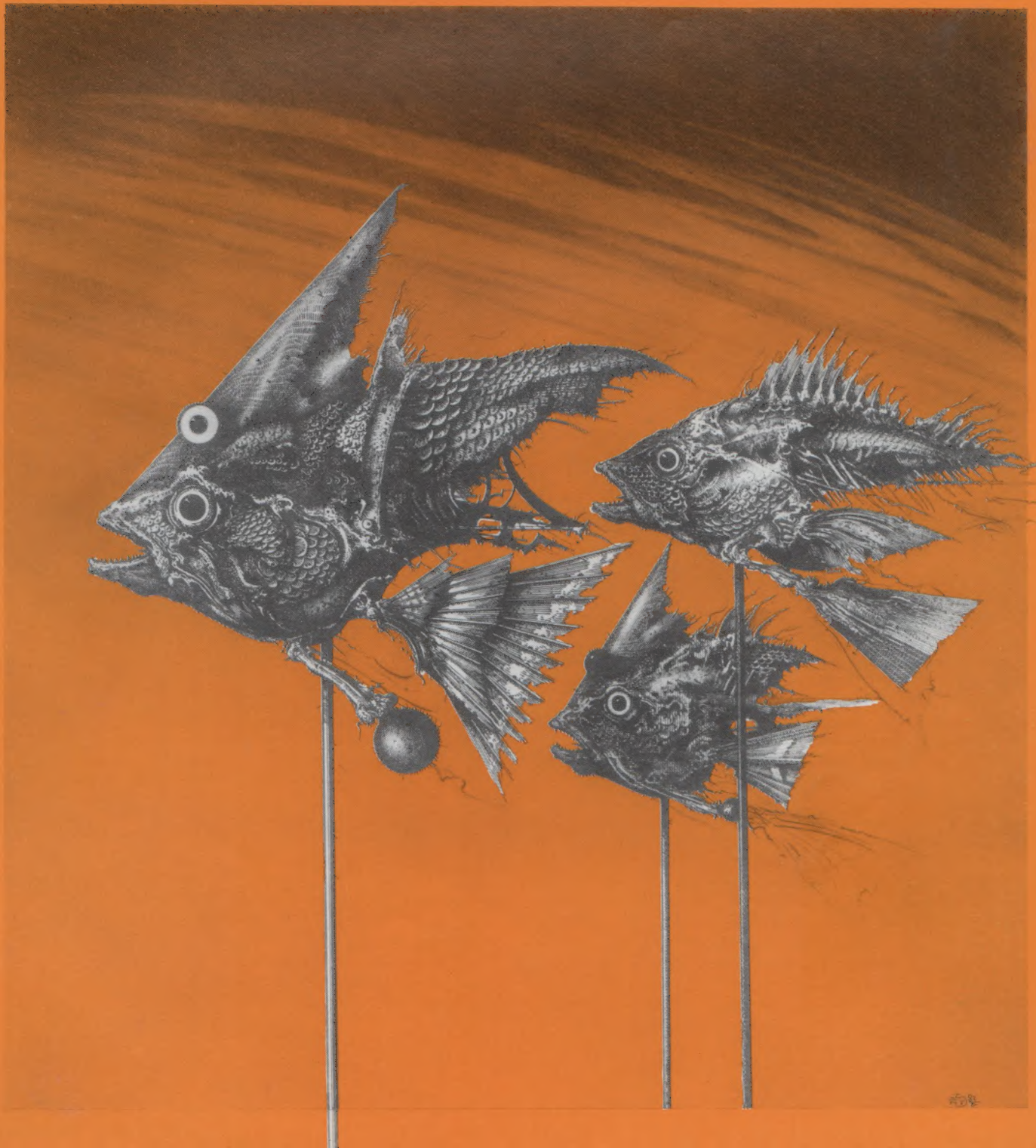


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Interzone

GEOFF RYMAN • THE UNCONQUERED COUNTRY
IMAGINATIVE FICTION AND ART



Interzone

No 7 Spring 1984

EDITORIAL

Interzone is a magazine of radical science fiction and fantasy — interpret that adjective as widely as you want. Of course it doesn't mean *Interzone* stories have to be deadly serious: we aim to entertain an intelligent readership. We want to publish fiction which has something original to say, stories which will move you, delight you, horrify you, in expansive ways. Not all of the stories we have published meet this ideal — readers can rarely realise how much editors are constrained by what is available and affordable — but we believe that the work in the present issue, and much of the material lined up for No. 8, does approach the radical sf we have been seeking. It is a continuing process: writers are encouraged by each other's example and by the feedback which a magazine provides. *Interzone* is securing its identity, and attracting the talent (both established and new) to reinvigorate imaginative writing. Having started from scratch in 1982, having fought all the way against high odds, we can take a certain pride in the fact that we have reached seven issues (many people predicted that we wouldn't). But seven is not enough! While we believe that we are coming closer to the magazine we originally had in mind, we still have a long struggle ahead in order to make it a self-sustaining success. We need more readers, we need publicity, we need distribution.

In fact we've been looking for ways to improve the distribution of *Interzone*. At the moment it reaches only the specialist science-fiction shops plus a few general outlets in areas where the editors happen to live (London, Leeds and Brighton). We have consulted several large distributors, but always with the same negative result: because so far we are able to print only a few thousand copies for national distribution they can foresee no sizeable profit to themselves and hence are not willing to take us on. It seems that a small profit (for a small amount of work) just will not suffice. Thus do magazines of modest sales-ambition get squeezed out of the market place. Apparently there is no middle course in the world of magazine publishing: either you are "big" (selling tens of thousands) or you are irredeemably "small" (selling a few hundred direct to subscribers). Frankly, we do not see ourselves as falling into either of these categories. In addition to our direct subscriptions, a bookshop sale of between five thousand and ten thousand copies would seem a glowing success to us. We do believe that sort of circulation is possible, given the distribution and publicity. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the distribution-and-retail moguls such figures represent failure — and for them "failures" just aren't worth supporting. What we badly need in this country is a distributor, perhaps subsidised by the Arts Council, who would be able and eager to take on the more promising little magazines and help them find their maximum natural audience. With that assistance a magazine like *Interzone* could even become a small-scale money-maker and require no further direct subsidy from the public purse. We live for the day!

David Pringle and Colin Greenland

CONTENTS

- 4 **Geoff Ryman:** The Unconquered Country
- 22 **Margaret Welbank:** Kept Women
- 24 **Bruce Sterling:** Life in the Mechanist/Shaper Era: 20 Evocations
- 28 **Michael Blumlein:** Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration: A Case Report
- 36 **In Review**
- 37 **Letters**

Editors: John Clute, Alan Dorey, Colin Greenland, Roz Kaveney, Simon Ounsley and David Pringle. **Art Editor:** Ian Miller. **Designer:** Abigail Frost. **Assistant Editor:** Andy Robertson.

Editorial address: 124 Osborne Road, Brighton, BN1 6LU. Alternative editorial address: 21 The Village Street, Leeds, LS4 2PR.

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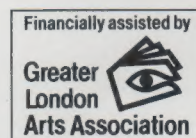
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The Unconquered Country

Geoff Ryman

I

Third Child had nothing to sell but parts of her body. She sold her blood. A young man with a cruel warrior's face — a hooked nose and thrusting lips between two plump cheeks — came to her room every two weeks. He called himself her Agent, and told a string of hearty jokes, and carried a machine that was rather like a pair of bagpipes around his neck. It whimpered and clung to him.

Third rented her womb for industrial use. She was cheaper than the glass tanks. She grew parts of living machinery inside her — differentials for trucks, small household appliances. She gave birth to advertisements, small caricature figures that sang songs. There was no other work for her in the city. The city was called Saprang Song, which meant Divine Lotus, after the Buddha.

When Third was lucky, she got a contract for weapons. The pay was good because it was dangerous. The weapons would come gushing suddenly out of her with much loss of blood, usually in the middle of the night: an avalanche of glossy, freckled, dark brown guppies with black, soft eyes and bright rodent smiles full of teeth. No matter how ill or exhausted Third felt, she would shovel them, immediately, into buckets and tie down the lids. If she didn't do that, immediately, if she fell asleep, the guppies would eat her. Thrashing in their buckets as she carried them down the steps, the guppies would eat each other. She would have to hurry with them, shuffling as fast as she could under the weight, to the Neighbours. The Neighbours only paid her for the ones that were left alive. It was piece work.

The Neighbours had coveted the lands of Third's people for generations. Then the people of the Big Country had, for reasons of their own, given the weapons to the Neighbours. Third's nation had called itself The Unconquered Country. It had never been colonized. When the Neighbours came, it fought. Third

had been a child in a rebel village in the hills that had flown the white and yellow flag of the Unconquered People. The women had worked the rice, while the men kept watch in the hills, with old guns from other wars.

Third was under her house, feeding the hens. Great Fat Ladies in White Bloomers, they were called, in the language of the Unconquered People. She fed them bits of slug from the paddies. Above her, the old house squatted, shifting its weight from time to time and letting out a long, shivering sigh. The houses of the People were alive, with wattles and wrinkles and patches of whisker, like ancient grannies. They wore roofed porches from their heads, like reed hats, and they knew their families, and cared for them.

Suddenly Third heard warbling from the men on the hill. Her old house let out a sudden, panicked hoot, and lurched to its feet, swaying. The wicker cages between its haunches snapped and flew apart. There were crashes of falling crockery from inside, and screams from Third's second sister. All the houses in the valley began to cry out over and over, the warning for a flood. The hens scattered in wavering lines through the dust. Third ran out to see.

Low overhead, and silently, came the Sharks. Sunlight reflected on their humming wings in a rainbow arc, and they were long and sleek and grey. Third saw their almost human faces, grinning and delighted. Dust whipped up into her eyes and she turned away.

An attack. Third knew what to do in an attack. She was to hide in the deepest part of the house and wrap herself in white blankets. But the porch of the house now towered above her head. Her sister stood on it, wailing, beetroot red, scalded by the stove.

"House, old house, let me in! Sister get inside!" cried Third.

The old house trumpeted in relief, and reached out blindly for her with its trunk. The house thought there

was a flood, thought it had to keep Third from trying to swim, from drowning. So it lifted her up, high over its round, featureless head, and began to march for the higher ground. Third could see everything.

She could see the women running from the paddies, but she couldn't see her mother. She saw the Sharks puff out their cheeks and blow, and where they blew, everything died in a line, like a furrow, the rice going brown, crumpling up like burning paper. She saw a Great Fat Lady collapse in a rumpled heap like a balloon losing air, her feathers curling up, melting away. A house suddenly shrivelled, sagging in its middle, its voice choked off, its skin crackling like pork.

Third saw the ancient guns on the hill swing round, and leap forward, and settle back. There was a boom and batter that made Third scream, and cover her ears. Parts of the opposite hillsides were thrown up in chunks of rock and the spinning heads of trees. The Sharks whistled, cheered, as if at a football match, and swept low over the guns. The guns went still. The Sharks rose up into the sky, reflecting light like dragonflies, almost beautiful for a moment. Then they turned and descended on the village again. Third, held up, was directly in their path.

Third's eldest, trusted sister jumped down from a cousin's house as it lumbered forward. She ran through the dust on her long, stick legs, in a red gingham dress, darting around the ponderous houses. "House!" she called as she ran. "Kneel down and let us in. Kneel down." She jumped up and down, trying to reach Third, jogging backward to keep up with the house. Third turned and saw the faces of the Sharks, the rows of smiles. They batted their eyelashes at her, and giggled. They puffed out their cheeks, like the Four Winds, and blew.

Third turned her head, and felt the withering blast of anti-life pass her by. It scraped her ankle, and the flesh over the bone rose up, bubbles of oil seething under a patch of skin. She felt the backwash of air, as the Sharks shot past her, and a wing throbbed for a moment, almost gently, on the top of her head. There was a tinkling, almost musical laughter. One of the Sharks made a rude farting sound, and as they flew, they sashayed, bumping their middles from side to side as if they had hips, in mockery of humankind.

Third looked down. Her elder sister lay in a congealing puddle. The gingham dress had gone orange. Her skin was a sickly, translucent yellow, rucked up and crinkled and soft. Her pigtails had gone altogether; strands of her hair blew in the dust.

The Neighbours followed soon after in the cavernous bellies of winged transports. They looked like the Unconquered People, the same sleek brown skin, and they were not ugly. They wore green coolsuits against the heat, and had bands of metal strapped to their index fingers that spurted fire and light where they pointed. They also carried the ceremonial bayonets that were the mark of a true warrior. Overhead, the Sharks hovered, holding the fluttering banners of the Neighbours in their teeth.

Third's mother sat in the darkest part of the house, Third and her second sister on her lap, rocking them, going "Sssh. Sssh. Sssh," to soothe them. The eldest sister still lay in the dust outside; the second sister wailed, inconsolably. For Third, everything was

muffled, even the pain in her ankle. Third was silent.

She must have gone for a drink of water, for at some point she was standing in front of the window by the tub. Through a wavering curtain of hot, rising air, she saw two village men being led out into the paddies. All the sound was muffled, too, except for the buzzing of flies.

She saw the Neighbours tease and taunt the villagers, saw them laughing, telling jokes, and flicking their cigarettes into the water. One of the villagers was very young, plump, with a soft round face and a thick moustache. He wore a crisp plaid shirt that his mother would have beaten clean that morning, and the loose black leggings of the People. The trousers had airy slits up the inside leg, and one of the Neighbours ran the blade of his bayonet up along it. The boy stepped back, scowling, bewildered, too anxious to be angry. Both the men were pushed down onto their knees. The other villager, wiry, nervous began to plead, jabbering. The Neighbours knelt on his shoulder, and pulled his head back, hard, by the hair, and he held up the thin palms of his hands against the bayonets. The boy sat, fists folded, calm, glancing over his shoulder at the familiar hills as if he did not care about them, not yet sure, unable to believe, that he was going to die.

Third did not remember his murder. She remembered the face of the man who did it. He was tiny and thin and wretched, with outlines of gold around his tobacco-stained teeth. His cheeks were deeply scarred by pockmarks, and he was grinning a rictus grin. It took over the lower half of his face, and Third understood that he was grinning in order to frighten, because he felt evil, and he thought that this was what evil looked like, and that evil made him important. Suddenly the young man was lying on his side, quite naturally, as if asleep, his face still soft and confused, blood spreading across his chest in the orderly patterns of the crisp, plaid shirt. Third's mother eased her away from the window.

"We are your friends," the Neighbours said, and requisitioned all the food. They gathered up all of Third's hens and carried them away. They ordered all the women to save their menstrual blood. That meant they intended to do something with it, to weaken the male power of the surviving men. They slaughtered ten of the old houses. "We will give you good, new houses," they said. The new houses, off-loaded from the transport, were made of dead things, and could not walk to new valleys.

"There is nothing for us here," said Third's mother. In the night, she parcelled up their stove, and a pot and some rice, and led her children away. Their house, their old, caring house, they left behind, tethered to a stake. It knew what was happening, and bellowed after them, tugging at the line that held it. Deserted houses sometimes died of love. "Don't look back," Third's mother said. "Even if I fall down." They flitted like shadows into the trees. They went, like everyone else, to the city. Third's mother carried her most of the way on her back.

There had been ceremonies of marriage in the village in which all the maidens were linked together by a chain of flowers. The villagers grew them, lilies, along the borders of the rice paddies. In the morning, the

scent of them would be thick all through the village. There was a medium in the village, who claimed she had the soul of a prince, who was in turn possessed by the soul of a sorcerer. Third had once seen her eat a glass cup to prove it, crunching it in her mouth. Each house had a shrine to the Buddha, which was exchanged each month with a different house. There were songs that everyone sang — feast songs, work songs, night-time songs. Long afterwards, Third would find herself humming them, no longer sure what they meant, only knowing that they made her feel sweet and sad and perhaps a little childish.

Her own name was a spell, to make sure that there would be no more children of that marriage. It had worked. A month after Third Child was born, almost to the day, her father was killed by a tiger. There were still tigers in the hills, and the only large animals left for them to eat were human beings. As they fled, Third and what was left of her family were in terror of the tigers. Where they slept, Third's mother made a small fire against them.

In the middle of the night, Third felt hot breath on her cheeks, and opened her eyes. Looming over her, as large as she was, was the face of the tiger. There was blood on its muzzle, and its great green eyes stared into her, piercing her like shafts, brushing, it seemed, her very soul, making it go hushed and cold. Third did not move. There was nothing she could do. The tiger snuffled her once more and then, having eaten already, silently padded away on its big orange feet. Third looked, and saw that her mother and sister were still alive, and went back to sleep. She did not even tell them about it in the morning.

II

The city of Saprang Song had paved streets and plumbing, enough for a million people. By the time Third was an adult, eight million, half of the People, had crowded into it.

The Neighbours introduced a new kind of mobile home. It was slow and stupid, a long beige tube, with ribs in its ceiling, and a single window, and a single door, and steps that could be stuck out like a tongue. The houses were supposed to spread out, across the countryside. Instead, the refugees discovered that the houses could climb, and perch on thin spider legs. They could cling to each other's backs. As the refugees swarmed, the houses rose up into haphazard towers, tall lopsided heaps of housing, waves of it, with no streets between them. The People had to walk up and over each other's houses to get to their own, or squeeze through narrow passageways past houses turned into tiny shops or brothels. They shouted at each other to be quiet, and fended off new, creeping houses with brooms. Lines of laundry grey and faded, hung between the towers, and the air was always full of the smell of cooking and the hearty blare of media entertainment. Sometimes the ribs of the lowest houses would break from the weight, and the towers would collapse in a fleshy avalanche. In the monsoon rains, the water would drain down the towers in steps, like waterfalls, and flood the lowest layers. The houses would go diseased, soft and bruised and seeping. The very poorest people dried the dead ones, and lived in the husks. Or they ate them.

Third was going to sell her left eye. It was common practice. There were dealers. They would prise it out of her, without any drugs for the pain, and freeze it, and sell it for transplants or machinery. It was illegal, of course. The dealers had stalls in the markets that could be moved quickly when the Neighbours came.

There were many people waiting in line. The old woman in front of Third already had a puckered pouch of skin where one eye should have been. She was going to sell her second eye in order to buy her granddaughter a wedding coat. She was very calm and gracious and proud, in immaculate black. "You must not imagine I was always like this, oh no," she said smiling, wagging a finger. "I was a high lady in my village." They all said that, but the gentle, precise way she spoke made Third believe her. "Now my granddaughter will be one as well. That is her mother, there, my daughter." A woman in a glossy pink jacket stood well away from the line, pretending not to see them. "Isn't she pretty? She is so embarrassed. Make sure she gets the money, please?"

"You. Next," said the dealer, a rather harrassed looking man, plump in his white shorts and bright printed shirt. He led the old woman away with his young son to help. He drew a black drapery on rings, like a shower curtain, around her. When the old woman emerged, both eyes were closed, and her skin was white and greasy with sweat, and she reached out into the air for Third, and tried to speak, but the sound was slurred and distorted, like a tape at the wrong speed. She grabbed Third's arm, and Third felt a jolt from her, like electricity, from the quaking of her bones.

Third fainted. She lacked food and blood, and she'd been standing for hours, and waves of nausea seemed to pour out of the old woman. When Third awoke, on asphalt, on crushed and sour cabbage, the woman was gone. A soldier, in the uniform of the Neighbours, was leaning over her.

"The Peace of God," he said. He was of the People, from the country, and with country courtesy he bowed, his hands pressed together as in prayer, at the level of his mouth and chin. That meant the soldier considered Third to be his equal.

She plainly wasn't. Third grunted and sat up. "Peace of God," she murmured, and did not bother to bow. She tried to stand up, to regain her place in line. The soldier helped her to her feet, but kept a grip on her arm, and would not let her move back towards the dealer's stall.

"Perhaps you would like something to eat?" he asked, grinning stupidly, with a battery of green, misshapen teeth. He was very ugly, with no chin and a large Adam's apple, and creases across his neck.

"Yes," said Third, immediately, whatever it was he wanted from her, though she was still feeling queasy. "In there." There was a small shop that sold dried insects in glass jars. Some of them were coated in sugar.

"No, no, you cannot eat there," he said, and pulled her with him.

"But that is what I want," she protested, looking wistfully back at the window full of insects. What sort of crazy man was this? Did he want a prostitute? She, Third, was no prostitute, he must see that. She was Dastang Tze-See, which meant Desperate Flies in Filth. Desperate Flies filled their wombs, as she did, with

other forms of life. No man would go near them. There were silly, nasty stories of men finding Sharks in wait inside them. He had seen her in the line, he must know that. So what did he want?

He took her to a proper food wagon where families ate, with a sign and a man in an apron, and he bought her roast pork and bean shoots and rice, and she nearly fainted again, from the smell, and from wonder.

She crammed her mouth full of it. The skin on the pork had actually been rubbed with salt, and it was crisp and moist with fat, and the bean shoots were hot and fresh and clean tasting, and the rice was hefty and drenched in soy.

"Is it good?" the soldier asked.

Third shrugged with equivocation, her cheeks round and shiny with grease. It was not wise to appear too grateful. The soldier watched her as she ate, still smiling. If only, she thought, he would stop grinning and hide those teeth. Poor people should never smile. She was considering whether she had the strength to run away from him, when he said, "I have to go now."

She looked at him, eyes slightly narrowed, still chewing.

"I must return to the barracks. Look, meet me here tomorrow, this time, and we will have another meal."

"All right," shrugged Third.

"You will be here? You will not go back to that line?"

Third worked a piece of pork loose from between her teeth. The line was her business.

"I'll give you money, you won't have to."

"I'll be here," said Third, scowling.

"Tomorrow, then," he said, and turned sideways to move through the crowd.

"Hoi!" Third called after him, and he looked around. "Why are you doing this?"

"For the sake of the People," he said, no longer smiling, and gave her another equal's bow.

In the old days, the young men had become priests, not soldiers. For two years they wandered in mendicant yellow, with begging bowls, their heads shaved. They left food in the ghost boxes for the dead, they healed the sick, they removed tattoos. They helped mourn for the dead. They sat cross-legged opposite relatives, and held their hands, and rocked back and forth with them long into the night. They wrote the histories of the dead, to be placed in temples and revered. After two years, they married and had children.

This old-fashioned man had been a priest. When Third learned that, she thought she understood him. It was time for him to marry. But this priest's first, family name was Crow. This meant his family were outcasts, for the crow was the omen of death. His personal name meant Nourisher of the East, which made Third smile, for the word Nourisher could also mean Dung. This Crow Dung had been an orphan since he was a child, and had no one to pay for a bride or to arrange a marriage. And he was ugly, ugly, ugly. Third had no illusions about herself. She knew she was short, round-faced, thick-waisted, thick-wristed. This Crow needed someone as ill-favoured as himself, who had no family to object to his name and standing. He might not know it, but he was looking for a wife.

Presently, indeed, Crow did begin to pay her court, with heavy formality and his terrible, unwavering

smile. Third greeted him with a certain wry amusement and unfriendly triumph. Oh, she thought, so I was right, that is what you are after is it? Well I am not what you think I am, so go away. He came back. Third, taking precautions, sent her blood agent away, and stopped being Desperate Flies. Crow never asked her what she had done to survive. It was then that Third, cautious and unsure of fortune, became bitter and nervous and ready to be aggrieved.

The People had a Prince, from before the Conquest, from before all the bad times. He was plump and healthy, with fine white teeth, and he was kind and clever. Even the Neighbours could see that, thought Third, that was why they had put him back on the throne. Under their noses, he prayed for the Deliverance of his People. Third kept pictures of him from the papers on her walls. She prayed to him. Then Crow, Nourisher of the East, thin and ugly Crow, said they would go to see the Prince, at the Ceremony.

Third's face went hard and cold, closed against possible disappointment. "I can't go. I can't go. I do not want to!" she insisted. Crow bought her a new dress, long and black with printed gold leaves. "Why did you do that? I did not ask you to do that!" she said. "I don't need your dresses." Rigid, scowling, she followed him through the Old City, where everything was dead and hot and made out of stone, a foreign city in the midst of the Country. She followed Crow through its intersecting avenues, into the shade of trees and temples, and out into the main square.

The square was the most ancient part of the city of Saprang Song. There were palm trees and umbrella pine all around it, and temples. They were made of stone too, but their spires were thin and delicate, and the smiling faces on them were the faces of the Buddha. In the middle of the square was a concourse of green, tended grass with a gravel track around it, and bleachers along one side. It was used mainly for horse races now. Once a year, it was used for the Ceremony...

A temporary stage had been built in the centre of the green. A small orchestra in formal evening wear sat on it, miserable with the heat. Rows and rows of priests, in yellow, with freshly shaven heads sat in pride of place, just in front of the stage. Behind them, on the grass or in the bleachers, were the prosperous people of the city. They sat on blankets with picnic hampers, and they wore the clothes of the Big Power. They had beautiful children, little girls in pink or orange trousers with white socks and shiny black shoes, who ran laughing, holding ice creams. The women sat serenely on rugs, like princesses, their legs folded under them, their hair in smooth oiled domes with shiny tin stars in it. Third only had one shirt, which she had to wear with her new dress. The shirt was cheap cotton, with faded blue flowers, frayed around the collar. Her dull, unoiled hair, pulled back severely and tied with a bit of coloured yarn, was that of a peasant. She clutched her meagre little beaded purse and walked without looking around her, blind with shame.

"Sergeant! Sergeant!" a voice was calling. "Sergeant Crow!" A man, sitting on a folding chair, wearing sunglasses and a uniform and a black beret was waving to him. He was smoking a cigarette in a silver holder, his teeth clenched about it as he called again. He wore polished boots to the knee.

As they approached, Crow bowed, grinning, and

bowed again, hands held high above his head. "Colonel! Sir! Colonel! Sir!" Crow said in an unpleasant, barking, official kind of voice. The colonel's wife, with an unperturbed smile, looked at, then away from, and finally through Third and Crow. She smoothed down her trouser suit, and adjusted her sunglasses.

"We find this Ceremony most important for the People," the colonel granted. "A sense of continuity is most important, don't you feel, Sergeant. Under the circumstances." The colonel had a long flexible leather cane, which he kept slapping idly against his boot.

"Certainly, Sir. The wisdom is apparent," Crow said, briskly. Even in his new green coolsuit and slicked black hair he looked wretched and small, dipping and bowing. Third moved from one foot to the other. The colonel's wife tapped her knees with the tips of her fingers. A pair of earplugs were whispering music to her. On top of the hamper was a bar of broken-open chocolate. In a moment, politeness would demand that the colonel ask Crow to watch the Ceremony with them.

Then Crow said, "I must make excuses, Colonel, Sir. But we have seats in the bleachers, and we must make our way to them."

"Of course, of course," said the colonel, already looking elsewhere. He gave a lax wave of dismissal with his hand as it hung over the arm of the chair.

"It has been delightful, Sir. Delightful, Madame," Crow assured them.

As Third walked away, she heard the wife say, her voice too loud because of her earplugs, "Hmm! The Crow and his Turtle."

Third stormed up the steps of the bleachers ahead of Crow. She pushed her way past a seller of sparrows in cages, and trod on the toes of people who stood up to let her pass. If I am a peasant, I will act like a peasant, she thought. She sat down without smiling and greeting the people next to her, without looking at Crow when he joined her. She answered him with fierce, short grunts.

"Look, Third, people from the Big Country," he whispered. Third had never seen Big People before. They had been given special places under a canopy by the stage. They arrived all together, lumbering like houses, tall, clumsy, with enormous booted feet, and they did indeed have skin the colour of plucked chickens. Their wives, towering columns of crumpled cotton, dropped down onto their deck chairs, relieved of their own weight. They were all so large, it seemed, swollen with power, sprawling on the chairs, chewing gum. They frightened Third, and made her angry. What are they doing if they don't want to be here, she thought. We don't want them. They don't understand. They don't believe. This is our country. One of them had orange hair and was covered in speckles, like a fish. Or a Shark.

Suddenly there was a sound like the sea, and all the People stood up and roared. It must be the Prince. Third looked wildly around her and finally saw, in the air, coming out of the north, a van, held aloft by four giant swans, and there was a man in it, and Third felt something unexpected catch in her chest. Yes, yes it was him, and he looked just like her pictures. He smiled and waved, and flung up both his arms over his head, like the Spirit of Happiness. The van swept



low over the crowd, and he threw out handfuls of white lotus blossom. His suit and his tie were white. The swans were white, their long necks held straight out, their wings whistling. They began to pump backwards, furiously, and the carriage was lowered towards the stage. Guards ran out to steady it. The orchestra struck up a cheerful, see-sawing song that the Prince had composed himself. Before the van was quite down, he launched himself over the side, like a fat, happy schoolboy. "Up! Up!" he shouted, and suddenly, from behind the stage, a flock of balloons was released.

They were silver, thousands of them, all blown, it seemed, towards the bleachers. They wriggled their way through the air, towards the People, and each of them, in silver, was a sculptured portrait of the Prince, and each one of them said, with the Prince's voice, "An offering. An offering to the Buddha. A holy offering." At the ends of each of their tethers, which were segmented metal bands, was a three-fingered hand. The hands reached out, and the People eagerly surged forward, reaching over each other's shoulders to place earrings or rice cakes into them. Third reached out with one small brass coin. The balloon's hand felt warm and rubbery. "Thank you, sister," the balloon said. Third's face was reflected back at her from the Prince's own.

"To Heaven! To Heaven!" beamed the Prince, and the balloons sucked in air, and swelled, and slowly, en masse, began to rise. The Prince urged them on with great windmill circlings of his arms. The priests, who had been still, leapt to their feet and began to bash gongs and bells and cymbals. The balloons interwove with each other, flashing with reflected sunlight against the pure blue of the sky. Spots of sunlight fluttered across the crowd, dazzling them, making them yelp. Then rising above all the other noise, slow and heavy, there began a song.

It was an old song, one Third could almost remember, one she thought everyone had forgotten. The woman

next to her reached across and took her left hand. All the People linked hands, as if they were flowers at a feast. Crow took her hand, too. Oh, she thought, we are not defeated, we are not broken. We still are the Unconquered People. A beautiful young girl of the People ran onto the stage, her face crumpled with the effort of not laughing, and kissed the Prince, to cheers. Many good things are real, thought Third. I am going to have a husband. The balloons dwindled, until they looked like a host of daytime stars. The Prince looked up and waved. "Bye, bye," he called, like a child. Crow, faithful with his broken smile, was looking steadily at Third.

Three months later, the wars began again.

III

The Big Men changed their minds. Who could say why the Big People did things? They gave weapons to the rebels this time, who were still in the hills like an unhealed sore. These weapons could do something new. Blowing Kisses, it was called.

A nurse led Third through the corridors of the hospital. The way the sounds and whispering reverberated made Third feel ill. Lined up on pallets all along the halls were the new wounded, muttering, often to themselves. They looked very calm, without a mark, except for strange bruises, as if someone had brushed them with ash.

Crow was on a bed, in a ward. There was nothing wrong with him that Third could see, except for a patch of skin on his forehead like the skin of a rotten apple. Wanly, he smiled when he saw her, and held out his hand. It was a monk's hand, with slender, flute-playing fingers. Third looked about her in dazed confusion. The nurse had to help her step over people to get to his bed.

"They found you," murmured Crow.

"A lady came and told me you were here, and led me."

"Blessed lady." His hand still reached out for her, but she did not approach.

"What is wrong with you?" Third demanded. She could see no wounds.

"There is a hot little egg in the middle of my head, and it is hatching. I can hardly see you. Come closer. Sit on the bed."

Third, who had hardly known what to do or say before, was now overwhelmed with mortification. There were people about them everywhere. It was bad enough having to talk in front of them. Nevertheless, she jumped up onto the very foot of the bed, her legs dangling so far from the floor. She coughed to clear her throat, and began to talk of innocent things. "I saw your aunt as you asked me. She is very well. She gave me tea. She has bought herself a dog. One of those small nasty ones with a face like a Chinese dragon. Stupid thing, to have a dog, you have to feed it."

"I hope you will be friends," said Crow.

"She treated me well enough," Third said, with a shrug. "My wedding coat is nearly finished." She had become a seamstress, working in the night, and she was saving scraps of cloth for it. "It is all white. It has a white dove on it, and it has a white portrait of the Prince."

Crow settled back and let his hand fall. "Tell me about it," he asked.

"That is all there is to tell, just that," she replied, embarrassed.

"It has a high, white starched collar and the winged shoulders," he said. His eyes were dim and loving, looking through all the hospital, at the coat, seeing it clearly, or perhaps another coat that he remembered.

"Yes, that's it," said Third in a thin voice, though it wasn't.

"That is good. That is a very country coat. But you must not let anyone see it. Not with the Prince's portrait on it. The rebels hate him. They will hate you. Promise me you will hide the coat."

Third was not pleased. Hide her coat. What was he talking about? "The rebels are People too."

"They have changed. When they ask, do not say you almost married a soldier. When they ask, say you married a fighter for the People, and that the foreigners killed him. It will be true."

"What nonsense!" said Third. "What is wrong with you? I can see nothing wrong with you." She looked about her at the other wounded. There seemed to be nothing wrong with any of them. "When will you be out of that bed?"

"Soon," said Crow.

"There!" said Third. Her legs ached from hanging over the floor. Angrily, she moved further onto the bed.

When she looked back, Crow was holding his hand over his head, watching his fingers wave, like wind chimes in a light breeze. He began to talk even worse nonsense.

"Hearts go up like balloons," he said. "Hearts ring like voices, echo like clouds. Cobbles underfoot. Always stumble. Drains. When looking upward. There is a bird singing."

"What are you saying?" Third whispered, looking around her. She wriggled further up the bed and finally took his hand. He grabbed it, fiercely.

"There is a bird singing," he insisted, his face shuddering as he began to cry. "They are pulling off its legs and wings, but it is still singing."

"Ssssh! There is no bird."

"There is! But no one can see it!"

"It is this place," said Third, miserably. "All this noise. It is confusing." Badly frightened now, she squeezed his hand, and covered it with her other hand, and she peered anxiously at him. He began a holy chant, a priestly mantra, over and over very softly, until his voice faded away altogether. He went very still, his wet eyes still on her. "That's better. That's better," she told him.

She had never realised before that he was beautiful. She had never seen his body. His legs were hot under the white sheet, and his chest was bare down to the waist, smooth and brown and surprisingly fleshy. His lips were only slightly parted over his crowded, crooked mouth, and a tear still crept down his face. She looked at his hand, and played with his long supple fingers. Even the hand looked more substantial now, veined and broad and masculine.

She coughed to clear her throat. "I have been thinking," she said. "This city is no good for us. It is a bad place, with all these Desperate Flies crowding in because of the war. We could go back to my village. There is much orderly planting there. It is in the west, away from where the war is now. There is a lot of land

there, because all the men have been killed. We could get married there. All the girls will be in a chain of flowers. They will sing the song of the true knight who climbed the mountain. They will steam fish with ginger." It seemed to her that Crow nodded, slightly, yes.

"We could look for my old house," she said. "They don't die, the old houses, they are like oaks. I'm sure it will know me. It is stupid to keep a dog when you can have a house. A house is shelter." For some reason she felt tears suddenly sting her eyes. That was foolish. "Ah, well," she sighed, and let go of his hand, patting it. She pulled around her work bag, and took out her quilting. "We can talk about it later. I will stay here."

A lady came towards her, in white, big breasted, in the squeaking white shoes of the Big People, and suddenly she looked to Third like one of the other White Ladies, a giant hen.

"You had better go now," the hen said, warily.

Third could not help but grin. She had to cover her mouth.

The woman looked very displeased, perhaps insulted, and she strode, still squeaking, briskly round the side of the bed, and felt Crow's forehead. Crow who had been smiling at her with Third, seemed to freeze with embarrassment at being touched by another woman in her presence.

"I will do that for him," said Third, shyly. She lifted up his hand, which was still warm, to pull the sheet up under it, to hide Crow's body from this woman. Abruptly, the woman snatched the hand from her, and held it by the wrist.

Then she leaned over, so that Third had to look at her terrible face with its strained smile. "There is no point to you staying any longer," she said.

"Tuh," said Third, and made a gesture of throwing the hen a bit of slug.

"It is best that you go now, really," said the woman, who was actually shaking from fatigue. "Come along now." She tried to take Third's elbow to ease her down from the bed. Third pulled it away.

"We are talking about family business," said Third, haughtily. "We do not want to be interrupted."

The hen put a hand on her own forehead, and closed her eyes for a moment. She sighed and said, "He will be doing no more talking."

"Then let him sleep," said Third, and picked up her quilting. "I will stay here."

"He is dead," said the woman. "I'm sorry.. We need the bed."

"Don't be silly," said Third. "He was talking to me a moment ago. Go away and leave us alone." She turned away from the woman, and took up her needle and thread.

"All right," said the woman, wearily. "You can have a few more minutes." Third heard her squeaking away.

She turned to Crow, who seemed to nod his head in approval. The tear on his face still moved. It touched the pillow and was gone, absorbed. Suddenly, even though it was daylight with people all around them, Third laid her head on his bosom. "I am like the cat, sometimes," she told him: "When things are near me, I pretend I do not want them. I think I do not care for them, in case they are taken away. Most things get taken away. It is like that when people are hurt. When

they are near, I give them no sympathy, in case they take advantage. It is only when I leave the room, that I can weep for them. Do you understand?" It seemed to her that he did. His chest was very still. She sat up, and moved the sheet a little higher. "I will be a very good wife," she said, boasting slightly. "I can sew, as you see. I can make do with very little for a real feast." She sat and stared and thought literally nothing for a very long time.

Until the hen came squeaking back. "This time you must go. This is really too bad. There are people on the floor!" Third looked at her, unblinking. The woman suddenly shouted. "There are sick people. You must leave!" Third would not move. "My dear woman, I know this is terrible, but there are others. Please go. Please." The woman looked around her helplessly, and then left.

Third stared at the body. It was very still, like statues of the reclining Buddha, but it was going ugly again. The teeth were sticking out further from the mouth, and the eyes, under heavy lids, were dry and crossed. A fly picked its way across the lips. Third, distracted, waved it away. It came back.

There was a bustle behind her, and the woman was coming with a man now, a doctor, and she was abject and pleading and servile, saying that she had asked, that she had tried everything. The doctor, aged and respectable, sat on the bed next to Third. He expressed his condolences and said that he did not know why it was that fine young men had to die, except that it could not possibly be the will of God. Could she see, though, that the bed was needed for other people's loved ones? Would she go? "Up, up my daughter," he said, trying to coax her.

Third suddenly snarled, and tried to hit him with her dogged little fist. He ducked and it missed. "First Sister was withered by Sharks! Second Sister..." she yelled, and choked and tried to hit him again. Her second sister sat in an airport window for the Big People, and arranged her hair so that the sores would not show. Her mother had starved herself to death so that they would have enough to eat. "Go away! Go away and leave us alone!" The doctor leapt down from the bed, slipping on his leather soles. Third flung her quilting after him as he scuttled away, and she sat and wept, not knowing why she was weeping, and hid her face.

Suddenly it was dark. There was soft moaning, and the clatter of instruments on moving trolleys, and the sound of flies. All that Third thought was that it was late, time for her to go. She jumped down from the bed, walked down the passageway between the beds, and nodded politely to a nurse as she passed. Somehow she found her way down the stairs and through the hallways, to the large, heavy main glass doors. It was not until she saw them, swinging, saw her own reflected image like a ghost in the blackness beyond, that she realized, or else remembered, that Crow was dead.

She gave a little yelp, and covered her mouth, and turned and ran. She had not looked at him properly, knowing he was dead, to remember his face. She had not asked the nurse what would happen next, what the funeral arrangements would be. In a panic, she ran down the corridors, which all looked the same, which

all echoed, which all were crowded with dying men who looked the same. "Crow! Crow!" she called for him, though it was stupid, he couldn't answer. She ran up steps, she remembered steps, to the room she thought he would be in, but all she found there was an empty bed among the full ones. She ran to another ward. "Oh no. How stupid. Oh no," she said to herself in a breathless voice. In that room all the beds were full of different people. Wrong room, back again to the first one. But all the beds in that room too, all of them, were full. Right room, wrong room. She saw a nurse, one she didn't recognize, and grabbed her arm.

"Many pardons. Many pardons. Can you tell me where my husband, Crow, Nourisher of the East is?"

The nurse, tired beyond endurance, simply shook her head and pointed towards a doctor in the shadows.

"Doctor," said Third, "Doctor, my husband is dead. He died here, and now I can't find his body, and I have to make arrangements!"

The doctor, one she didn't recognize, took her arm. "You are the next of kin?"

"Yes, yes," she said, trembling like a bird.

"Then don't worry. Go home and try to sleep. We will contact you about the arrangements later. Come now, this way. I will show you the way out."

"Thank you, Sir. Many pardons," said Third and looked back over her shoulder, hoping by accident to catch one last glimpse of Crow.

The doctor held open the heavy main door for her, and bowed. Light flashed on his spectacles. Light flashed on the glass door as it swung shut. Overhead there was a crackling noise and a flower-burst of light. There were fireworks. Fireworks? thought Third, scattered, still shaking. Why should there be fireworks?

"Oh Crow," she whispered as the sky was spangled. "How could you leave me? What do I do now?" She realized that she loved him. Not his broken face or nervous grin, but his heart, what was inside him. It was too late now to realize that. Like the cat. She watched the fireworks.

Dark against the ochre sky, there was the spire of a temple. Suddenly, as badly as she had ever needed anything, Third needed a priest. She ran.

Across the hospital square, past a fountain, up the temple steps, to the great carved doors. The doors flickered in the fitful pink-white fireworks light. They were locked and bolted. Third tried to shake them, and called, panting, in a weak voice, "Peace of God? Peace of God?"

When had temple doors ever been barred? Suddenly angry, she slammed her fist against them, pounding, and heard how small the noise was in the rolling darkness behind them.

"It's closed," a voice said behind her. An old man was squatting on the steps, hunched over a bowl of rice, twisting round on his haunches to look at her. Third stared at him.

"The temple is closed," he repeated.

"Are you a priest?" Third demanded, avid.

"What? No, oh no. All the priests have fled. Haven't you heard? They refused to join the army, and the Neighbours started putting them in jail. Where have you been hiding?"

"Where did they go?"

The old man laughed. "Ho! Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell. One of them set himself alight in the main square.

You must know that. Where they have the Ceremony. The Neighbours will not let anyone bring flowers to that place. They will not let anyone mourn."

"There must be priests somewhere. Have they all gone, all the temples?"

"Ah," the old man shrugged. "Who can say?"

Third ran from temple to temple, all across the city, and they were all closed. The fireworks erupted overhead. Victory, the Neighbours were claiming, in only two month's time. The summer streets were full of laughing people. A parade of street players jostled past Third. They carried huge lights that blazed into her face. Their aloof painted faces smiled as rockets whined overhead. An old woman picking over fruit glanced at Third, blinking with heavy-lidded, reptilian eyes. No one knew who Crow was, no one knew he was dead, no one knew of the grief that Third carried within her, like a pouch of pus. "Have you seen a priest?" she asked, and people passed, pretending not to hear. There were soldiers, celebrating, waving their weapons in the air. You will die, Third thought, coldly.

It grew late. Third saw a man bowed under a machine, carrying it on his back, delivering it. He wore scraps of cloth that had been sewn together to look like an important person's suit of clothes. She passed women sleeping sitting up on the pavement, naked children sucking on their crinkled breasts. A line of students meandered arm in arm down a street, wearing white T shirts splattered with rebel slogans in red paint. They wound themselves, laughing, around a fire hydrant.

"Forget your priests," they told Third. "The priests can't help you, they just sit on their yellow backsides." They burred a mocking imitation of a holy chant. "Pieces of God. Pieces of God. Pieces of money." They wheeled drunkenly away, like a straggly white worm.

Very suddenly, Third was alone in the middle of the wide avenue. She heard the sound of wind move across the cobbles. She knew, with the sensation of claws sinking into her back that she would not be able to mourn. There was no way left for her to mourn. It had been taken away. She looked up at the sky. How nice it would be, she thought, to be a balloon and simply drift away, to somewhere else.

"Hi!" piped a shrill little voice. It was an advertisement, standing suddenly in front of her. "I'm the Coca-Cola girl!" It thrust a glass of fizzing soft drink up towards her.

"No thank you. Go away," said Third.

Advertisements came alive at night, and were allowed to climb down from their signs. They were slightly flattened, like cartoon figures, with sharp creases along the edges of the arms and legs and heads. This one was a little girl, with pigtails, and wide Mickey Mouse eyes, and a red gingham dress, and three-fingered hands. She broke into a song.

"Coca-Cola gives you life
Gives you hope
Gives you strength
To carry through the day!"

Third turned and walked quickly away from her. The advertisement was programmed to sing, to someone, and there was no one else. She followed Third down the steep slope of the avenue, skipping. Her

shiny black shoes went pop pop pop on the cobbles because they were suction cups. Third covered her ears, and began to run. The advertisement ran with her, dancing. "Busy people like you like Coke because it gives them instant energy to face the brisk life of the city," the advertisement pleaded, wishing perhaps it was able to say something else. "One glass of Coke gives you all major vitamins and minerals, including the B and C groups so necessary to cope with stress. Stay healthy! Stay happy! Drink Coke!"

"Go away!" shouted Third.

The advertisement staggered back a step. Then she began to sing again. "...gives you life/ Gives you hope/ Gives you strength..."

Give me my husband, thought Third. There was scaffolding, unassembled, beside a building. Third picked up a length of pipe and spun round and smashed the advertisement as hard as she could.

She hit it on the shoulder. The arm broke off. It was full of red, rather dry meat, and did not bleed. Third squawked in horror at how easily it broke apart. The thing kept on singing "...gives you life..." Third hit it again and again, to make it quiet, to stop it singing, to knock it away from her. Its skirt slipped off and the naked little legs kept on dancing with nothing above them. The head lay on the ground, its cheeks still the colour of peaches, and it was still singing. Third kicked it, and it spun around and around like a plate, skittering down the hill. Third could hear the sound of the wind again, hollow. She drew in shaky breaths, feeling ill, and finally wanted to go home.

She had to walk back across the Old City, and through the heaps. She knew each heap by name — the Scarecrow, or the Fist Raised Towards Heaven. It was the time of the dogs. They barked, wild and unchecked, as she climbed up and over the roofs of other people's houses, towards her own. Once she was inside it, it turned its light on, and there it was, bare and grey and streaked and smelling of fungus. She groaned and fell face down onto the bed.

She heard the sound of many children playing and a band playing the Prince's song. Oh, she thought gratefully, oh, I'm falling asleep. As soon as she thought that, she was wide awake, with the iron knowledge that Crow was dead. Crow, she thought, I'm sorry I cannot mourn. It must be a terrible thing to lie unmourned. You must wander unsatisfied. She lay unmoving for a very long time, eyes open. Perhaps this is what it is like to be dead, she thought. Outside a cat was mewling, caught in a trap. People ate them now. Then Third remembered. There was one thing Crow had asked her to do.

She lit a candle and took out her wedding coat. It was lumpy, misshapen, made of scraps, unfinished. She saw that now. Everything in her life had been like that. She knelt and cut open the floor of her room, and the house shivered in pain, and she lifted up the lip of flesh. The hollow in the floor began, immediately, to seep moisture. She wrapped the coat in a plastic garbage bag, so that it would not be stained, and she laid it in the hole, smoothing it down so that it would not wrinkle. She managed to squeeze a tear out of herself, like liquor from an unripe wound, and she closed the flesh over the coat, and covered that with matting. It would heal shut.

Then Third stood up and walked, dazed, out of her house, she did not know where. Direction chose her.

She found herself at the edge of the main temple square. The umbrella pine rose and fell like waves around her. The bleachers were there, for the horse races, but where the stage had been, there were only blowing bits of paper and a patch of white ash. Lights bobbed idly about it. It was guarded. Third was turning to go, when she heard, within the wind, the sound of a cry.

The cry was small and plaintive and sweet. It sounded like Third felt, as if something had been lost. It was coming from under the trees nearby, a whistling that rose up at the end, like a question, like no other noise Third had heard before. She ducked under the branches. There was something on the ground, a bundle, and the light caught it. It was bird that was making the noise, its feathers puffed out in the wind, a young bird. She knelt beside it, her throat clenching like a fist. The bird was a crow.

"Crow!" she said and picked it up and finally, gently, softly, the tears came, in an easy film down her face. She rocked with it, back and forth. "Crow. Crow. Crow."

Suddenly the lights were harsh in her eyes, and she turned away.

"What are you doing here?" demanded one voice.

"Why are you crying?" demanded another.

They were Neighbours. Third could only see their shadows behind the lights.

"I am crying because of this bird. It has been blown from its nest. It is so small."

"You are not supposed to be here. Get out."

Third stood up, and bowed to them, and ran. She held the bird to her face and breathed on it. A crow was an omen of death, but a crow that sings was something more. There is a bird singing. He had said that.

Weeping, consoled, Third was sure that Nourisher of the East had found his way back to her.

IV

The Crow that Warbled grew into a great, ragged-feathered beast, with grey-green scaly legs and claws, and a beak that seemed too large and heavy for its head. It was too big to be kept in a cage; there were perches in all the corners of the room, and linen cloths under its feed tray and a sand box. In one corner of the room was a shrine, with paper flowers that Third had made from chewing-gum wrappers. In frames made of twisted wire were drawings she had made of the Dead: her mother who had starved, her first sister who was withered; her second sister who sat dead and undiscovered for half a day in an airport window. There was a drawing, too, of Nourisher of the East, looking as plump and healthy as the Prince.

Third had never been told where the funeral was. She was not, after all, the next of kin. She did not know where Nourisher of the East had been cremated, or where the ashes were. When she visited his aunt, the people in the next house smiled and said she was not at home. The fifth time she came they said, still smiling, "In all fairness, we ought to tell you that, for you, she will never be at home."

"Tell her," Third replied. "That all she has is ashes. I have the soul."



She had the Crow that Warbled. She called it husband. She bathed it regularly in the cleanest water she could find, and dried it in white cloths, laughing and teasing, and it would tilt its head, as if wondering if she were mad, and that would make her laugh more.

She set it free, over the heaps, from her high window. The Crow that Warbled would hover, high, in the same place for ten or fifteen minutes at a time, and it would sing, and the songs it sang were the songs of the People. Third knew it was a spirit then. How else would it know to sing the morning song at dawn, or the feast songs, or the songs for the Dead? The poor people, in their dangerously shifting heaps of housing all looked up towards it. They understood the miracle. The wild children who lived like animals in packs under bridges, crept out of the shadows to listen. Old women would hum along with the songs, rocking on slippery mushroom steps, remembering. When it was tired, the Crow would flutter down amongst them and look pointedly at the rice in their bowls. They would chuckle and give Crow some, for they knew it was a ghost, and it was utmost politeness to feed a ghost. They would duck and bow at its arrival, their clasped hands high over their heads in respect. But the Crow always returned to Third. The People would look up at her window then, and wave. She was mistress of the miracle. And Third, for the first time, smiled back.

It was strangers who didn't like the Crow, people who wore the clothes of the Big Country and carried lacquered canes, people who were lost and panicked in the heaps. The Crow would drop on them to say hello, for it thought it was human. It would come singing the song of hospitality, a black Crow, bringer of Death. The strangers would scuttle away, quietly, pursued, holding onto their hats, afraid to run or shout, because that would mean they thought they would die if the Crow touched them, and City People were not supposed to be superstitious. They believed nonetheless and would try to swipe at Crow with their canes. The people of the heaps would point at them and laugh. They would follow in a crowd to see the end of the comedy. The strangers would think they were being chased by the poor. Their faces said that all their most anxious fantasies seemed to be coming true.

People started coming to Third for cures. She found that by laying hands on them, she could send them away at least thinking they were better. She began to grow herbs in window boxes for remedies. People gave her messages for dead relatives, for the Crow to carry. They bowed to her, hands high over their heads, and called her Widow.

Third had to wear spectacles now. A doctor at the hospital, to which she kept returning, got her a job in his brother's factory. She peered down a microscope, watching crystals grow. The crystals were sliced continually as they grew, and Third had to make sure that the pattern on each slice was the same, like rock candy. The work ruined her eyes. In the evenings, she sewed, jabbing her fingers with the needle because she couldn't see. The Crow that Warbled perched beside her, and seemed to watch with interest.

She collected old advertisements. Her babies, she called them. Some of them might have been. They were old, about to die. She hung them on the wall, faded green, rusty red. When she fell asleep, over her

sewing, on the floor, they came alive. Their skin was peeling off, and they could no longer sing except in worn, whispering voices. The Crow would try to teach them new songs, but they shook their heads. That was beyond them. They danced around Third as she slept, in the moonlit room, like dreams. In the morning, they would be back on their signs, frozen still and silent.

Third even began to get to know her house. It had not been programmed to care about who lived in it, but Third dusted its corners, and swept away its old itchy skin, and talked to it until it came to know her and the rhythm of her tread. She knew when it slept, and sat still herself then, to let it rest. Friends told her that it grew fretful and sighed when she was not there, in the market, at work.

There was always work, at the factory, in the heaps, at her quilting: work as the pot bubbled on the stove in the home Third would have made for her husband, work, until, after only two or three years, she became stolid and drab, her skin toughened somehow and polished-looking like old leather. People called her Old Woman. She elbowed her way through the stalls, singing the old songs in a loud shrill voice, pulling a squeaking wooden wagon behind her, a small bow-legged woman in spectacles and a very faded cotton shirt. Everywhere she went, she expounded the miracle of the Crow that Warbled.

"He goes back to the Land of the Dead, to where everything is as it should be, as it was, where the People still are Unconquered," she said.

The People of Saprang Song could hear the war, its dull roar, its high-pitched hum, but the battles never seemed to reach the Divine Lotus, as if the city were charmed. Over it, over the heaps and the People in them, the Crow that Warbled hovered, singing the old songs.

V

The rebels won. The news was spread by the packs of ragged orphans who lived wild. They ran through the heaps, and were for once admitted without qualm into the rooms of the People. Outside Saprang Song, in the burnt paddies, the army of the Neighbours and their servants had been destroyed.

The City People celebrated. They built bonfires in the squares and in the narrow passageways between the heaps. They banged on pans to make something like music, and blew through paper on combs. The rebels were the People, like themselves; the People had won. They hung their white sheets out of their windows as a sign of victory. They gathered under Third's window and called for the Crow that Warbled. It hopped excitedly among them, from shoulder to shoulder. They bowed to it, laughing with toothless mouths. They sang with it. They grew drunken and bold, heaping up the banners of the Neighbours onto the fire, wrapping themselves in white to jump over the flames. "Unconquered. Unconquered. Unconquered," they chanted, hopping up and down in unison. This was not an old song, or an old dance. Third didn't like it. She slipped away unnoticed to her bed.

Almost everyone was asleep, sleeping late, when the rebels came.

Third awoke to the sound of things falling. She heard laughter, loud. She got up, and stumbled bleary-eyed to her window.

She saw pots and plastic buckets cascading down the side of the lower heaps, and two men wearing nothing but their underpants dancing round and round a rice barrel. They chanted like children, "All fall down." Mr Chiu, a Chinese immigrant had opened up his house as a tiny shop. He stood outside it now, still in his nightshirt, distraught, biting his thumbnail. The shop was being ransacked. Third ducked low behind her window.

The men tipped the barrel over, and Mr Chiu cried "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!", and the rice fell with a hissing sound. The men staggered back from it, laughing. They were soldiers, soldiers for the Neighbours added on battle drugs, traitor People who had taken off their uniforms. All of this will stop, thought Third, with a sudden jab of military feeling, now that the Neighbours have gone. One of them wheeled around and pointed his finger at the jars in Mr Chiu's window, and the plastic containers burst into flame, belching out black smoke. Mr Chiu gave a little scream and scurried into his house to push the burning jars out of his window with his bare hands. The soldiers plumped down onto the rooftop, and woozily began to pull on shirts and trousers. Their feet caught in the cuffs, and they set each other off on fresh bursts of hacking, senseless laughter. The clothes were Mr Chiu's own.

This will not be a day to be out on the streets, Third thought. "Crow, today we will stay inside. Until everything is settled, and the Neighbours are gone." Crow seemed to understand. With cowboy cries, the soldiers pushed themselves off down the slopes, tobogganing on their arses, bumping at each level. One of them waved Mrs Chiu's most private garments over his head. Mr Chiu stumbled out through the smoke, weeping, cursing, under the white celebratory linen that was now turning black.

There is no food in the house, Third suddenly remembered. Worse. There is no water. Mrs Chiu was trying

to coax her husband back inside. He shouted up at the towers, cursing the People, the harm they had brought him, cursing them for not helping, and he flung a tin up toward them.

Chiu will give us no food, not now, Third thought. I have to go to market. If I go now, while it's early, I may miss the worst of it.

"Stay inside," she warned the Crow. "Today is not a good day. Today will not at all be like last night." She took her squeaking wagon, and crept down the heap, on the side away from Mr Chiu.

There was an old market that opened early for wholesalers. It had once been well outside the city. The heaps had encroached upon it, shifting. Each day they surrounded it in a different shape. Third came upon it unexpectedly, up and over the roof of a house. She saw the two long sheds in the middle of the square and a mass of black, people in black, rebels, a rebel encampment, and she tried to dart back. Instead, she slipped, and slithered down the side of the house. She landed on the market pavement, with a great clatter, just next to a rebel boy and an old truck.

The boy howled, and spun around. There was a ripple of laughter from the other rebels. Third made a show of laughing, too. The rebel boy did not offer to help her up. He stared at her as if she were a ghost. He had a tattooed face and several wristwatches along one arm and wires trailing out of his ears. Third stood up, smiling. "Peace of God," she wished him. "Grateful praise to long-awaited victors." The boy's rough country face did not light up with a courteous smile. It stared back at Third, and then shook with a scornful chuckle. He turned back to the truck. It sagged in the middle, and it cowered and trembled in front of him. He climbed into its cab and shouted an order, a wrong order. The truck whined miserably, and twisted in place, refusing to obey. The boy shouted again. This time, the truck did what it was told, and backed up at high speed, into the wall of houses, breaking through the mushroom flesh.

There was desultory applause from the rebels; this boy was not held in high regard. Third saw them, slumped on the stone, sprawled against each other, exhausted, with leaden, unmoving faces. There were girls among them, and they were young, almost children.

The boy jumped out of the truck, slamming its door so hard that it yelped in pain. Inside the broken wall, a woman and two children crouched amid the smells of cold soup and beds. The boy stepped back, his face contorted with rage, and he howled, and he suddenly seemed to fill with light. His eyes glowed with it; it shone orange through the flesh of his cheeks, and lit up the roof of his mouth. It blazed, blinding out of his eyes, and the truck was suddenly engulfed in fire.

"Get out! Get away!" shouted the woman in the house. The truck obeyed; it jumped forward on its wheels and stood still, juddering and coughing in pain and panic. Third ducked away from the heat. Suddenly the truck roared forward across the market square directly at the rebels. They jumped up, or somersaulted backwards out of its way, and it crashed into a wooden support, pulling down a corner of the shed,



tipping up and rolling over and over with part of the tin roof. It settled on its back, its wheels whirring helplessly in the air as it steamed and crackled and spat, shivering, whinnying like a horse.

Third began to walk towards a gap between the houses; it was full of hanging laundry; she could hide behind it. She had to leave her wagon behind; it would squeak and draw attention. She began to think she might escape, when she heard the sound of sandals flapping behind her. She went very still and waited. "City Woman!" a voice said, triumphant.

She turned as they crowded round, craning their necks to see her, with dead, blunted faces. Shadows of smoke wafted across them. Third could smell their sour clothes. They had encrusted teeth and lumps just above the eyelid where parasites dwelt. "Peace of God," she said, warily.

"God. Pah!" said one of the boys, spitting at her feet, to a murmur of laughter. Even the spittle was tinged with black.

"I came back to the market, and saw that it was empty, so I am leaving," Third explained.

"Market!" exclaimed a girl, indignant, and began to strut, hands on hip. "We have had no market, City Woman, in five years. We had to eat worms. Would you like worms to eat, City Woman?" Then Third understood; this was a brave, naughty girl. She saw again, under the bandanas and weapons and salt-stained black, how young they were, rude children, and she lost her fear. She became outraged.

"I ate worse, girl," she replied. "I had to sell my blood. My mother starved to death. I am nearly blind from working in their factories. So don't you spit at me when I give you holy greeting, and call me City Woman, because I am one of the People. And the People show manners and respect!"

Some of them giggled at this old-fashioned display of authority. "And who is your husband?" challenged the girl, coming closer.

"My husband was a fighter for the People and the foreigners killed him!" The words came out of her without thought; she was bursting with rage, stretched so tight with it that tears oozed out of her, because she finally understood, looking at the foreign weapons, why it was true. "I am a Country Woman!" she shouted. "I had to flee here for my life! From the Neighbours!"

This was not what the rebels expected. They looked at each other, scowling and bemused, and scuffed their feet on the stone. "From what village?" demanded the girl.

Third told her, proudly, fiercely. And for good measure, she cuffed her about the head. The girl did not strike back.

"It's one of ours," said an older boy, grimly. "Mata!" he said, which meant "We have made a mistake." It was a swear word. He bowed, suddenly, hands held high, and said in another voice, the voice he would have had if there had been no troubles. "We are sorry, Mother. We have offended without cause."

"Yes you have!" snarled Third, water shaking itself out of her eyes. The others bowed, murmuring.

"We will escort you back," the older boy said. "The streets are not safe. There are too many bad elements. We must deal with them. But we mean no harm to any of the People." He was some kind of leader among them, with a weary face, his hair tied up in a bun at the

back. "We are fighters for the People, too." He tried to smile.

Ten of them went with her, pulling her wagon as she stalked on ahead of them, still angry.

"We put out the sheets to meet you," Third said, flinging a hand up in the direction of the white hangings.

"We expected to be met. We thought people would cheer us," said the youngest, and was nudged into silence.

"We sat up all night at fires, singing because you had won," she told them, bitterly.

She pointed to the fires as they passed them. They skirted mounds of garbage. People lived there too, in shacks made out of garbage. They passed a quagmire of sewage called the Slump. The rebels craned their necks in wonder at how high the heaps had risen, swaying slightly in even this faint morning wind, pinkened slightly by the dawn.

"There are so many!" one of them said. "It can't be done! What they tell us, eh? We won't be able to."

"All the real People will leave," repeated the leader. "They will leave because they want to leave. The others will not be real People."

Third was thinking furiously. Leave? All of us? Is that what they mean to do?

Then, against a blue sky, between the Scarecrow and the Fist Raised Toward Heaven, she saw the Crow that Warbled, flying towards them. She gave a little cry and covered her mouth. She knew what was going to happen.

The Crow was singing as it came, a clear morning song, one that praised wifely duties and domestic content. He was greeting her. He was greeting their guests.

"Go back!" Third shouted at it. "Crow go back! Get away!"

The rebels saw it too, the omen of death. The older boy lurched forward, his face curling with disgust, choking with it. He had seen so much of death that images of it were clear to him. The youngest boy hissed, and picked up a smouldering blade of bone from a fire, and threw it at the Crow. The bird landed in the narrow passageway and hopped towards them, twittering, cocking its head in a sideways question, bouncing toward Third, with whom it was always safe.

"Crow go back," she pleaded.

"Go back!" the rebels repeated. The Crow hopped up onto Third's shoulder and the rebels drew back, and the Crow said hello to them in a cheerful, bobbling note. Then it hopped onto the head of the youngest child. He squealed and went still. The Crow leaned over, upside down, its claws clenched onto his hair, to peer into his face. The boy screamed, and could not move. One of the others, swiped the bird from his head, and it fluttered to the ground. The rebels kicked it, and suddenly it let out an ugly squawk of fear, the sound of a real crow.

"He is not Death," Third was saying, but she could not make the words loud enough. "Crow! Sing!"

There was a scattering of feathers. The Crow hopped twice, away from them, and into the air, and its wings made a hearty flapping noise, and it rose up, veering between the rows of hanging sheets, and all the

windows were full of the faces of the People, and it was like the Ceremony. The Crow rose up above the sheets, higher than all the towers, to where it always hovered and sang, to where Third thought it would be safe, when the old rebel made a horrible noise, his head full of suppurating memory, "Uhhhhhh!" like a vomit, and he pointed his finger at the sky, steel clamped around it. Third could follow the tongue of light through the air, see it curve with the nightmare slowness of foreshortened perspective, and her mouth gaped slowly open because she couldn't breathe, and she saw the light flick at the bird, and disappear.

The Crow that Warbled burst into flame. It flew, on fire, orange and red and white, higher than ever before, deeper into the sky. It rose, then dipped, swerving, then found its course again, straining toward heaven. It hung in the sky, still for a moment, and then fell.

It fell, the speed of the air extinguishing its flame. It struck a heap and rolled off it into the air again, thumping into another house, sliding down its side into the box of herbs in Third's window. It flared up again, setting the rosemary alight, scenting the air. There were screams from the People.

Third was still. Third was silent. She wondered very calmly what would happen now that the Crow was destroyed. She was not at all surprised when out of the portal of a house, rocking back and forth down the steps, came a tiger. It sat on the roof of the house below, tamely, and licked its muzzle, and waited.

Everything was muffled, except for the sound of flies. At Third's feet lay the young man in the plaid shirt. Black, congealed blood pumped out of his chest, and he held it up towards Third in his hand. It was happening again. It was happening again. Where the rebels had stood, the murderous little Neighbour grinned. His pockmarked face was close to hers, the teeth edged in gold, and his eyes gleamed with an amused knowingness. "You see? You see?" he seemed to be saying, over and over, like a bad joke that needs no explanation. "Go away," murmured Third. She felt an arm go round her shoulder.

The arm was pale yellow and withered. Third turned and saw her elder, trusted sister. She was bald, and her face was like an old fruit that had exploded. The eyes had expanded from the sudden heat and burst, the lips had burnt back from the teeth.

"Take off your spectacles, Third," her sister told her. "Not now. Slip them off while no one is looking and let them fall. Only City People wear glasses. They will kill you for them. That's right. Slowly. Casually." Her sister cradled Third toward her, pressing her against the gingham dress. She was still taller than Third, on long stilt legs. "Oh, I have missed you so much, sister. I have wanted someone to talk to so much. Now we will talk all the time. I will go with you now, and take care of you. We all will. All the Dead."

"Ah, yes, so that's it," thought Third. "I see. I see." Crow was like a gate that had broken open. The Dead could come through it. She let her glasses, a scant presence in her hand, drop. Everything was blurred, as if seen through tears. She saw a blurred woman wave her arms, shouting at the rebels.

"It is no good, everyone must leave now," the rebel was saying.

"But where will we go? How can we leave?" the

woman demanded. Quiet, fool, thought Third. They have weapons. And they are crazy.

"Back to the country. Go back to the country so you can be People again, not this City Filth, where you are all whores of the foreigners, with their trash. You go now!"

"But I have to pack my things!"

"You will need nothing. Everything will be provided."

"My children!"

"Your children belong to all the People. The People will care for them."

"Madness! Madness!" shouted the woman, realizing, staring at them.

"You will all leave before midday," the older rebel announced. He was a mere wavering of black to Third. "All leave the city. It is diseased and we are going to burn it!" He threw up his hand, and blasted the sky, and there was a noise like thunder back and forth across it. The People fell silent. They began to be afraid.

Enough, thought Third, and turned, and began to walk.

"Where are you going, Mother?" the oldest rebel asked.

"I am going home, to my village," she replied, and she thought of her advertisements on the wall, and the drawing of Crow. She had made it look like the Prince.

The rebel grabbed her arm, and turned her around. "You see?" he challenged the People. "This woman does what is right. You can too. She is a real Person. Show that you are."

"Do what they say," advised Third, glumly, and began to walk again. The rebel walked with her.

"Do not go like that," he murmured, pressing close. "Go back to your house. Take some food."

"There is no food in my house," replied Third, thinking of the paper flowers.

The rebel pushed a rice ball with a sliver of dried meat wrapped around it into her hand. "Take this." He gave her his tin cup. Without looking at him, Third snatched them; without another word, he darted back to the others.

"You see?" Third's sister said, not marching, but sauntering beside her. "You are charmed. We protect you." Only the Dead, thought Third, were clearly visible. The living were fading.

It was still quiet, still early. Bands of rebels, chatting, quite ordinary, were wiring up loudspeakers while children looked up admiringly. Somewhere in the distance, a scratchy broadcast voice began. Rebels went from door to door. "There is threat of disease," they said.

People took time to pack. Delay, delay, that will cost you, thought Third. She walked more quickly. There was a fight in front of a shop, and a man shouting "You pay! You pay!" Excited children ran about on the heaps, blowing on toy horns. Third saw a man at the very top of a heap. He was rocking back and forth on his heels for balance, trying to coax his house down on a leash. Third's sister tugged at her sleeve. "Autumn! Where is Autumn?" a woman's panicked voice called out over and over.

In the Old City, the paved streets were full of people, running or pushing baby prams full of goods. They bounced and jostled Third. She could only see things that were far away, the broad patterns. She could see the clouds. She was looking at them, to rest her eyes, when she heard a dull spreading roar, at once crackling and moist, like a spill of watermelons. It started behind her, to her left, and moved around her in the same way the sound of breaking surf moves along a beach. She turned and saw the heaps collapsing.

She saw a tower pitch forward from its middle, and the houses on top of it separated, scattering, their spider legs kicking as they seemed to almost float down through the air. The main body of the tower nudged another, breaking it in the middle, sending houses somersaulting through the air, spilling furniture, hurtling into other houses, dislodging them, bursting apart. The houses above these, without support, slid helplessly down, other houses still on their backs. It was a contagion, each house linked to another. They collapsed, and broke, and gathered into a massive spreading weight, a roiling wall of flesh. It smashed into the first of the hard stone buildings, rearing up and slapping down on its roof, scraps spilling all over it, and very suddenly came to a stop. Boom, like that. The noise stopped, and there was a mound of flesh held back by the stone, pressed in layers like the kebabs the Arabs cooked. The sun, through mist, seemed to perch on top of it. A sound came from within it, very faintly, like the squealing of seagulls.

Third turned away, and marched. She walked with her eyes closed as much as possible, humming a song. Opening them, closing them, she saw the dismantlement of Saprang Song in flashes.

She saw a Chinese family burned. They were cheering the rebels, lined up on the roof of an emporium, waving flags, and the rebels burned them, aunts and nieces and grandfathers. Before Third could look away, they were set alight. They stood rigidly within the fire, still holding up infants, like an old family photograph, blackening.

Something stick thin, leaning on a gleaming metal pole lurched in front of Third. "Can I take your arm, dear?" it asked. It was a woman. She was wearing a blue hospital coat, and the pole supported a pumping, artificial heart.

"Ask someone else," Third replied. "I can't see."

Something bumped into her, and apologized with two voices. It had wrinkled skin like an elephant, only it was blue: crumpled pyjamas. Two men missing legs were hopping together for support.

Third dimly made out the shape of the hospital building. The rebels were making the patients march as well. Third found herself suddenly in a line of marching things, all down around her knees, hunch-backed, bobbing, and all talking at once, very softly and clearly. "I am a delicate piece of life-saving equipment," said a little beige box on muscular, human legs. Another, armoured like a beehive, black, waddled ahead of it. "I can take over cerebral functions for all blood groups," it announced in a hushed voice. "Please treat me with care."

Suddenly a rebel stepped in front of Third. "You are going the wrong way, Old Woman," he said.

"I can't see!" exclaimed Third. She could see well enough that the line of machines led to another mound

of flesh. There was a shadow on top of it, black. It had a sharp green grin. "Please treat me with care," said the little beige box as the shadow brought something, a garden hoe perhaps, down on its head.

"You go that way, to the Bridge," said the rebel, trying to block her view. "Across the River, that way there." Third leaned around him, curious. She wanted to see. There was a white coat talking, a doctor.

"But these things save lives, they can save the lives of your friends, why are you doing this?" wailed the doctor. Without breaking the rhythm of his swing, the shadow brought the hoe down with a crack, on the doctor's head as well.

The rebel grabbed Third's arm and pulled her away. "She can't see!" he called out to his comrades. Then he murmured, thin lipped. "You didn't see anything. Did you?"

He led her to a wide avenue that went down the hill to the bridge, and there they were, the People, a dappled mass of them, black-haired heads and many-coloured shirts. Some of them wore coolsuits and hiking boots and rucksacks; some of them carried parasols and twirled them. Some of them sat on the balconies of buildings, as if at a festival, drinking from tins and eating sandwiches. The People, always polite, always patient, talked in lowered voices about practicalities, without complaint.

"Once we are across the Bridge, we will be all right."

"Ssssh, ssssh, darling, later. We need to save the food for later, all right?"

"Oooof! It's hot. Why couldn't they wait until spring?"

Third felt her sandal come off her foot. She spun around, but it was lost under a forest of legs. It advanced. "My shoe! I can't see it! Can someone get it for me?" Third asked. People looked down around their feet, and shook their heads.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I can't see it," said a City Woman, very prettily. Third could see the blurred back-and-forth motion of her hand, and the wide, white fan with red patterns. Her little daughter looked up at Third in silent dislike. Third could see her black eyes.

"Where are we going, Mummy?" the child asked in a discontented voice.

"You are going, Child," said Third, unbidden, leaning down, "to the Unconquered Country." The little girl buried her face in her mother's side. "Oh no, you must not be frightened! It is very peaceful there. Everything is as it should be, there."

"What do you mean?" the mother asked, sheltering her daughter.

Third bowed and made a gesture that enough had been said, and, smiling rather smugly, turned away. It was not for everyone to know. The sun seemed to swell, directly over the middle of the street. The People shuffled forward, a step at a time.

Suddenly the crowd heaved itself up in front of Third. They were on the stone steps of the Bridge. Third climbed them, as if they led to the altar of a temple, feeling a sudden gathering grandness, as if she were being married. Overhead, the great grey workings of the bridge loomed like a gate. Third could see them clearly. She fixed her eyes on them, as she was carried forward in slow procession by the crowd. Then, at the very hottest moment of the day, under a

merciless sun, in the middle of the bridge, it came to a stop, and did not move again.

The asphalt underfoot was just on the point of melting, a sort of black putty, and Third had to move from one foot to the other, to save the bare one burning. There was nowhere to sit down. The People, pressed together, could smell each other's bodies. Balancing on the railing of the bridge, holding onto a suspension cable, was a rebel girl, scowling with the heat, blinking. Just below her was the body of a dead soldier. The People backed away from it as much as they could, wrinkling their noses. Third squeezed her way through them, smiling, and sat down next to the corpse. Her knees touched it.

"Hello, Third," said the corpse. Third looked down and saw that it was Nourisher of the East.

"Hello," she whispered to him.

"Listen," he told her. "You will be on this bridge for two days. People will die. It is most necessary that you get water. You can survive two days without food, but no water in this heat for two days and you will not be able to stand up, and the rebels will kill you." He told her how to get water. Third could not accept it at first, would not have accepted it from anyone else. "Wait," he said, "until it is dark." The rebel girl leant back and drank deeply from a canteen.

Water was a joke at first, to the People on the bridge. They were so thirsty, and down below, a hundred feet away, was the river. They could hear its roar; they could smell the spray. They drank the last of their warm sticky lemonade. People lost control of their bladders and bowels and could not wash. Infants began to shriek for water. It was only two hours later that Third saw someone jump off the bridge. He was a young boy. He clung, hunched, to the railing for a long time, before finally letting himself slip off the side. His friends crowded round the edge to look, and then silently turned away.

People began to crawl along the railings to get out. Third nodded up at them, benignly. She was not agile enough to climb, and they shaded her from the sun. For most of the distance, there were no cables to hold on to, and the people see-sawed their arms, until they fell off, landing on the people beneath them: much angry shouting. A man in a brightly coloured short-sleeve shirt fought his way through the crowd. "Anything to drink?" he kept asking, smiling, perplexed. He had a fistful of paper money. "All of this, for a bottle of Coca-Cola. Here, look. All of this for you." A young woman, smiling, shook her head. The man could not believe it. "Look, what is a bottle of Coca-Cola worth?" The woman still shook her head. "It could buy you a nice house, a car!" he said, with a yelping, nervous laugh. He looked at Third. "All my life," he said, "I spent it making money." He moved on. Sometime later, Third saw the money blow past the railings, like leaves.

Surreptitiously, she took the corpse's hand. She wanted to ask Crow if the fire had hurt. She wanted to ask him if he knew that she had made a house for him, and lived the life she would have had if he lived; that she had been happy. But it was difficult to ask such things, and besides, she already knew the answers.

"I came back," Crow said. "I could have kept on

flying; the flesh had been burned away. But I chose to come back."

"Boddhisatva," said Third, realizing. Gratefully, she closed her aching eyes and slept.

Suddenly it was cooler, dark. "Now," said Crow. Through the girders of the bridge was a tangle of stars. Amid them, the rebel girl squatted out over the railings, her trousers down around her knees. Third crawled forward with her tin cup. She held it out under her.

The girl squawked, and clenched, and stopped herself.

"Please," said Third. "It's only water. It's the only way. There is nothing wrong."

The girl looked helpless and harrassed; finally she had to let go. The water spilled gently out of her; it rang in the tin cup, filled it generously. It seemed such a natural, friendly thing to do, sharing water. Third very elegantly raised the tin cup and sipped it. It was surprisingly cool and mild, only slightly salty. She nibbled her rice ball for a moment, then held it out toward the girl. The rebel hesitated, but was very hungry. Finally, she broke off a piece of it, and gave Third a wisp of a smile.

The girl was from Durnang province, to the north. Most of her family were still alive, but scattered. She had never been to school; she had fought with the Ghost Wolf regiment instead. She asked Third why she held the hand of a dead traitor.

"Because he was of the People, once," said Third. "There is no difference. The Dead are the living." The girl did not believe in the Buddha. That was Molu Raba, she said, Consoling Nonsense. Third repeated the words.

"We must get off this Bridge," said the girl.

"How?"

"We could just walk out, over them," said the rebel.

"If there's trouble — pow. Come on."

Third looked at the People, all lying in orderly rows. "No," she said. "You go. I'll stay." She watched the girl stumbling out over the backs of the People. Where she passed, there was the wailing of a baby.

Why did I do that, Third wondered. She knelt down again beside the body. She picked up the cold hand. Whose are you? she asked the hand. It looked so small. Did anyone mourn for you? Did any one love you, like I loved Crow? She looked at the expanse of fallen faces, blue in the moonlight.

There is a part of me that loves them, she realized. That is why I stayed, because they are my People. That is not Molu Raba. She sat through the night, holding the dead hand.

The next day ground on, hotter and hotter, like a mill. The faces of the People were the faces of the Dead — bloated and unmoving and lopsided, with open mouths. An infant was lapping the asphalt, ceaselessly, with its tongue. Third stroked its head to make it stop.

You are all Dead, she thought, we are all crossing over. The thought made her feel peaceful and at home; all of her friends were Dead. In the city behind, brown clouds of smoke were rising up. In the sky overhead, birds still wheeled on currents of air, and clouds still subtly changed shape, breaking up the light, casting huge shadows through it. In the sky, like a daystar, a

tiny white light was moving. Somewhere up in heaven, the Big People had placed one of their machines. High up, there was cold metal and safety. The Big People slid between the stars, it was said, in a network, like a spider's web. That was as close as they would ever get to Heaven. Slide, Third told the Big People, slide and leave, leave the world to us again.

She closed her eyes and dreamed of great arches made of white stone in the sky, and the arches made her happy, like being in a temple. They held up the sky and the stars, and there was a road, a bridge across a gulf. The bodhisattvas came back along it, out of love, to lead the People. She saw them, wearing gold hats like the spires of temples.

Night. Death. Dawn. Cool breeze, smelling acrid, the odour of burnt tires, and an ochre sky with a heavy orange sun.

"Now," said Crow. "Get up." The corpse's head had disappeared under a sheen of jelly; and translucent, wire-thin worms twisted in its mouth. "The worms are the truth," Crow said. "They are words." Third stood up, the breeze cool on her face, even with the smoke in it. Her legs were grateful for the chance to stand, and she shook her feet, to get the blood flowing. Over the river, between the cliffs and the trees on the bank, there were shreds of low mist. Mist was still there.

"You have been lucky, Third," said her elder sister, leaning on the railing, looking away from her. "You have never been withered. You did not starve to death. You almost had a husband, and he died at just the right time, or you would have been a soldier's wife. You have never been rich so the rebels will not hate you. You have no one now to hold you back, or make you worry. Everyone you love is dead. You have lived the best life it is possible to live in the Land of the Faithful."

There was a jabbering of orders from far ahead. The People sat up, blinking, prodding relatives, helping them, groaning, to stand up. An old woman jerked awake and began to wail. A mother tried to wake her baby; there was something wrong with the way its mouth hung. The mother shook it, and began calling

its name. "Stand up," said Third, a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Take him with you. It is time."

Like balloons, thousands of them, the People, her friends, the Dead, rose up. They went with her across a bridge, across a gulf; her sister who was withered, her sister who had died in an airport window, an old man she suddenly recognized from her village. She gave him a friendly wave. There was a man, too, whose face she could not quite see, riding on the back of the tiger.

And as they watched, there came a sudden booming and crackling. Fireworks? Why would there be fireworks? Third turned in time to see the spires of all the temples on the hill rise up on clouds of dust, like rockets. They were lifted up, and listed to one side, straining towards Heaven, hanging in the air for a moment, and then fell, uninhabited stone. Ah yes, even that made sense. The temples were being destroyed too, killed, to join them. The temples would be there waiting, and the villages. Third felt something feather-light descend on her back, and something dry and bony wrap itself around her neck, and she felt her mother's face press close to hers. The skull was only lightly covered by a dry crackling of skin. "I carried you once, daughter," she said. "Now it is your turn to carry me."

And in the sky was a bird made of fire. It burned, leading them, and it sang, a strange sad song that rose up at the end like a question, for everything that had been lost, an orphaned song for an orphaned people. The bird was not struck down.

"We are going home, child," whispered Third's mother. "Third Child, we are going home!"

for John Lennon, for Philip K. Dick, for Walter

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Geoff Ryman has lived in London for a number of years. Just recently he moved to Oxfordshire, where he now works for a publishing firm. His first short story appeared in Hilary Bailey's anthology *New Worlds 10* (Corgi Books, 1976). His first novel, *The Warrior Who Carried Life*, is forthcoming from Allen and Unwin in late 1984. He has the following to say about himself and about "The Unconquered Country":

"I've never been to Cambodia, or the Far East, but it's occupied my mind for some years. I'm not sure how long ago it was — some time during the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia — that I saw a feature in one of the large magazines, *Life* or *Look*. It was about Cambodia, and there was a photo in it of a young wife in hospital, looking at the newly dead body of her handsome young husband. For years afterwards from time to time, I would find myself imagining her having to walk back home alone. But she would find, in the war-torn city, that the temples had been closed and that there was no way for her to mourn. This never happened in Cambodia, at least not under the Americans. My woman was living in a fantasy country. It was not until I realized that, that I was able to write this story.

"When I was a child, I lived in a small Canadian village. Christmas really was a season there. Every house would have a party in turn, every night for weeks, and presents would be exchanged then. All the children went to school in a wooden frame schoolhouse, with a pump well and a bell, that had been built in 1871. When a rabid fox was loose in the village, school closed early, and the men of the village

went out together, to shoot it. Parents of my friends could remember when wolves would come down out of the north in winter. Now those fields and my best friend's farm where I used to see deer running have disappeared under supermarkets and tract housing.

"When I was eleven, we moved to Los Angeles, the city where everything is allowed, a burgeoning of mansions on hills, surrounded by a desert of gas stations, parking lots and various kinds of ghetto. I was there in time to catch the tail end of *American Graffiti*, and saw it through Sgt. Pepper's, *Armed Love*, and the collapse of the sixties. That bit was fun, to be honest, and sometimes inspiring. But it also seemed to me that what was really meant by culture — an agreed set of values and traditions — was being destroyed by something corporate, bland, and isolating. In retrospect, the story is also about the destruction of culture.

"I'm not a fan of ideology or repression, but America's idea of freedom is freedom from both. It means freedom from having to believe in anything and from having to take part in a community and its expectations. It can mean freedom from meaning and from having any defined duties towards other people. I find England has marginally more sense of community and that's why I live here now.

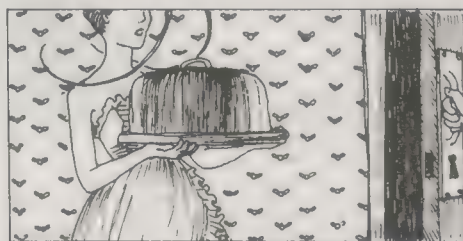
"If you want to read more about the real Cambodia — the political wheeling and dealing, the wars, and the holocaust — can I suggest *Sideshow* by William Shawcross."

The illustrations by Michael Gabriel which accompany Geoff's story were specially commissioned by the author.

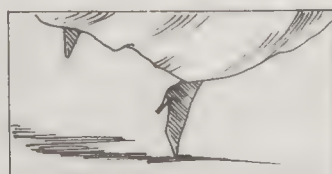
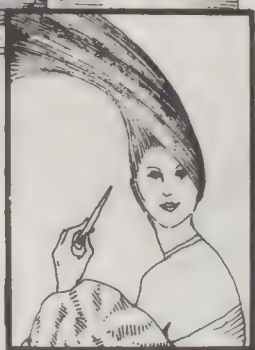
M. Welbank
Kept Women



The door is only open
for a few
seconds
every day



Yesterday I found a bone that
someone else had nibbled clean.



Havent seen a window for several days now

I've seen one room so large it has its
own clouds

The last two air vents were blocked.



Life in the MECHANIST/shaper era

20 evocations

Bruce Sterling

1. EXPERT SYSTEMS. When Nikolai Leng was a child, his teacher was a cybernetic system with a holographic interface. The holo took the form of a young Shaper woman. Its “personality” was an interactive composite expert system manufactured by Shaper psychotechs. Nikolai loved it.

2. NEVER BORN. “You mean we all came from Earth?” said Nikolai unbelieving.

“Yes,” the holo said kindly. “The first true settlers in space were born on earth — produced by sexual means. Of course, hundreds of years have passed since then. You are a Shaper. Shapers are never born.

“Who lives on Earth now?”

“Human beings.”

“Ohhhh,” said Nikolai, his falling tones betraying a rapid loss of interest.

3. A MALFUNCTIONING LEG. There came a day when Nikolai saw his first Mechanist. The man was a diplomat and commercial agent, stationed by his faction in Nikolai’s habitat. Nikolai and some children from his creche were playing in the corridor when the diplomat stalked by. One of the Mechanist’s legs was malfunctioning and it went click-whirr, click-whirr. Nikolai’s friend Alex mimicked the man’s limp. Suddenly the man turned on them, his plastic eyes dilating. “Gene-lines,” the Mechanist snarled. “I can buy you, grow you, sell you, cut you into bits. Your screams: my music.”

4. FUZZ PATINA. Sweat was running into the braided collar of Nikolai’s military tunic. The air in the abandoned station was still breathable, but insufferably hot. Nikolai helped his sergeant strip the valuables off a dead miner. The murdered Shaper’s antiseptic body was desiccated, but perfect. They walked into another section. The body of a Mechanist pirate sprawled in the feeble gravity. Killed during the attack, his body had rotted for weeks inside his suit. An inch-thick

patina of grayish fuzz had devoured his face.

5. NOT MERITORIOUS. Nikolai was on leave in the Ring Council with two men from his unit. They were drinking in a free-fall bar called the ECLECTIC EPILEPTIC. The first man was Simon Afriel, a charming, ambitious young Shaper of the old school. The other man had a Mechanist eye implant. His loyalty was suspect. The three of them were discussing semantics. “The map is not the territory,” Afriel said. Suddenly the second man picked an almost invisible listening device from the edge of the table. “And the tap is not meritorious,” he quipped. They never saw him again.

... A Mechanist pirate, malfunctioning, betraying gene-lines. Invisible listening devices buy, grow, and sell you. The abandoned station’s ambitious young Shaper, killed during the attack. Falling psychotechs produced by sexual means the desiccated body of a commercial agent. The holographic interface’s loyalty was suspect. The cybernetic system helped him strip the valuables off his plastic eyes. . . .

6. SPECULATIVE PITY. The Mechanist woman looked him over with an air of speculative pity. “I have an established commercial pattern here,” she told Nikolai, “but my cash-flow is temporarily constricted. You, on the other hand, have just defected from the Council with a small fortune. I need money; you need stability. I propose marriage.”

Nikolai considered this. He was new to Mech society. “Does this imply a sexual relationship?” he said. The woman looked at him blankly. “You mean between the two of us?”

7. FLOW PATTERNS. “You’re worried about something,” his wife told him. Nikolai shook his head. “Yes, you are,” she persisted. “You’re upset because of that deal I made in pirate contraband. You’re unhappy because our corporation is profiting from attacks made on your own people.”

Nikolai smiled ruefully. “I suppose you’re right. I

never knew anyone who understood my innermost feelings the way you do." He looked at her affectionately. "How do you do it?"

"I have infrared scanners," she said. "I read the patterns of blood flow in your face."

8. OPTIC TELEVISION. It was astonishing how much room there was in an eyesocket, when you stopped to think about it. The actual visual mechanisms had been thoroughly miniaturized by Mechanist prostheticians. Nikolai had some other devices installed: a clock, a biofeedback monitor, a television screen, all wired directly to his optic nerve. They were convenient, but difficult to control at first. His wife had to help him out of the hospital and back to his apartment, because the subtle visual triggers kept flashing broadcast market reports. Nikolai smiled at his wife from behind his plastic eyes. "Spend the night with me tonight," he said. His wife shrugged. "All right," she said. She put her hand to the door of Nikolai's apartment and died almost instantly. An assassin had smeared the door handle with contact venom.

9. SHAPER TARGETS. "Look," the assassin said, his slack face etched with weariness, "don't bother me with any ideologies.... Just transfer the funds and tell me who it is you want dead."

"It's a job in the Ring Council," Nikolai said. He was strung out on a regimen of emotional drugs he had been taking to combat grief, and he had to fight down recurrent waves of weirdly tainted cheerfulness. "Lieutenant-Doctor Martin Leng of the Ring Security Council. He's one of my own gene-line. My defection made his own loyalty look bad. He killed my wife."

"Shapers make good targets," the assassin said. His legless, armless body floated in a transparent nutrient tank, where tinted plasmas soothed the purplish ends of socketed nerve clumps. A body-servo waded into the tank and began to attach the assassin's arms.

10. CHILD INVESTMENT. "We recognize your investment in this child, shareholder Leng," the psychotech said. "You may have created her — or hired the technicians who had her created — but she is not your property. By our regulations she must be treated like any other child. She is the property of our people's corporate republic."

Nikolai looked at the woman, exasperated. "I didn't create her. She's my dead wife's posthumous clone. And she's the property of my wife's corporations, or, rather, her trust fund, which I manage as executor.... No, what I mean to say is that she owns, or at least has a lienhold on, my dead wife's semiautonomous corporate property, which becomes hers at the age of majority.... Do you follow me?"

"No. I'm an educator, not a financier. What exactly is the point of this, shareholder? Are you trying to re-create your dead wife?"

Nikolai looked at her, his face carefully neutral. "I did it for the tax break."

... Leave the posthumous clone profiting from attacks. Semiautonomous property has an established commercial position. Recurrent waves of pirate contraband. His slack face bothers you with ideologies. Innermost feelings died almost instantly. Smear the door with contact venom....

11. ALLEGIANCES RESENTED. "I like it out here on the fringes," Nikolai told the assassin. "Have you ever considered a breakout?"

The assassin laughed. "I used to be a pirate. It took me forty years to attach myself to this cartel. When you're alone, you're meat, Leng. You ought to know that."

"But you must resent those allegiances. They're inconvenient. Wouldn't you rather have your own Kluster and make your own rules?"

"You're talking like an ideologue," the assassin said. LED displays blinked softly on his prosthetic forearms. "My allegiance is to Kyotid Zaibatsu. They own this whole suburb. They even own my arms and legs."

"I own Kyotid Zaibatsu," Nikolai said.

"Oh," the assassin said. "Well, that puts a different face on matters."

12. MASS DEFECTION. "We want to join your Kluster," the Superbright said. "We must join your Kluster. No one else will have us."

Nikolai doodled absently with his light-pen on a convenient videoscreen. "How many of you are there?"

"There were fifty in our gene-line. We were working on quantum physics before our mass defection. We made a few minor breakthroughs. I think they might be of some commercial use."

"Splendid," said Nikolai. He assumed an air of speculative pity. "I take it the Ring Council persecuted you in the usual manner — claimed you were mentally unstable, ideologically unsound, and the like."

"Yes. Their agents have killed thirty-eight of us." The Superbright dabbed uneasily at the sweat beading on his swollen forehead. "We are not mentally unsound, Kluster-Chairman. We will not cause you any trouble. We only want a quiet place to finish working while God eats our brains."

13. DATA HOSTAGE. A high-level call came in from the Ring Council. Nikolai, surprised and intrigued, took the call himself. A young man's face appeared on the screen. "I have your teacher hostage," he said.

Nikolai frowned. "What?"

"The person who taught you when you were a child in the creche. You love her. You told her so. I have it on tape."

"You must be joking," Nikolai said. "My teacher was just a cybernetic interface. You can't hold a data system hostage."

"Yes I can," the young man said truculently. "The old expert system's been scrapped in favour of a new one with a sounder ideology. Look." A second face appeared on the screen; it was the superhumanly smooth and faintly glowing image of his cybernetic teacher. "Please save me, Nikolai," the image said woodenly. "He's ruthless."

The young man's face reappeared. Nikolai laughed incredulously. "So you've saved the old tapes?" Nikolai said. "I don't know what your game is, but I suppose the data has a certain value. I'm prepared to be generous." He named a price. The young man shook his head. Nikolai grew impatient. "Look," he said. "What makes you think a mere expert system has any objective worth?"

"I know it does," the young man said. "I'm one myself."

14. CENTRAL QUESTION. Nikolai was aboard the alien ship. He felt uncomfortable in his brocaded ambassador's coat. He adjusted the heavy sunglasses over his plastic eyes. "We appreciate your visit to our Kluster," he told the reptilian ensign. "It's a very great honor."

The Investor ensign lifted the multicolored frill behind his massive head. "We are prepared to do business," he said.

"I'm interested in alien philosophies," Nikolai said. "The answers of other species to the great questions of existence."

"But there is only one central question," the alien said. "We have pursued its answer from star to star. We were hoping that you would help us answer it."

Nikolai was cautious. "What is the question?"

"What is it you have that we want?"

15. INHERITED GIFTS. Nikolai looked at the girl with the old-fashioned eyes. "My chief of security has provided me with a record of your criminal actions," he said. "Copyright infringement, organized extortion, conspiracy in restraint of trade. How old are you?"

"Forty-four," the girl said. "How old are you?"

"A hundred and ten or so. I'd have to check my files." Something about the girl's appearance bothered him. "Where did you get those antique eyes?"

"They were my mother's. I inherited them. But you're a Shaper, of course. You wouldn't know what a mother was."

"On the contrary," Nikolai said. "I believe I knew yours. We were married. After her death, I had you cloned. I suppose that makes me your — I forget the term."

"Father."

"That sounds about right. Clearly you've inherited her gifts for finance." He re-examined her personnel file. "Would you be interested in adding bigamy to your list of crimes?"

... The mentally unstable have a certain value. Restraint of trade puts a different face on the convenient videoscreen. A few minor breakthroughs in the questions of existence. Your personnel file persecuted him. His swollen forehead can't hold a data system...

16. PLEASURE ROAR. "You need to avoid getting set in your ways," his wife said. "It's the only way to stay young." She pulled a gilded inhaler from her garter holster. "Try some of this."

"I don't need drugs," Nikolai said, smiling. "I have my power fantasies." He began pulling off his clothes.

His wife watched him impatiently. "Don't be stodgy, Nikolai." She touched the inhaler to her nostril and sniffed. Sweat began to break out on her face and a slow sexual flush spread over her ears and neck.

Nikolai watched, then shrugged and sniffed lightly at the gilded tube. Immediately a rocketing sense of ecstasy paralyzed his nervous system. His body arched backward, throbbing uncontrollably.

Clumsily, his wife began to caress him. The roar of chemical pleasure made sex irrelevant. "Why... why bother?" he gasped.

His wife looked surprised. "It's traditional."

17. FLICKERING WALL. Nikolai addressed the flickering wall of monitor screens. "I'm getting old," he

said. "My health is good — I was very lucky in my choice of longevity programs — but I just don't have the daring I once did. I've lost my flexibility, my edge. And the Kluster has outgrown my ability to handle it. I have no choice. I must retire."

Carefully, he watched the faces on the screens for every flicker of reaction. Two hundred years had taught him the art of reading faces. His skills were still with him — it was only the will behind them that had decayed. The faces of the Governing Board, their reserve broken by shock, seemed to blaze with ambition and greed.

18. LEGAL TARGETS. The Mechanists had unleashed their drones in the suburb. Armed with subpoenas, the faceless drones blurred through the hallway crowds, looking for legal targets.

Suddenly Nikolai's former Chief of Security broke from the crowd and began a run for cover. In free-fall, he brachiated from handhold to handhold like an armored gibbon. Suddenly one of his prosthetics gave way and the drones pounced on him, almost at Nikolai's door. Plastic snapped as electromagnetic pincers paralyzed his limbs.

"Kangaroos courts," he gasped. The deeply creased lines in his ancient face shone with rivulets of sweat. "They'll strip me! Help me, Leng!"

Sadly, Nikolai shook his head. The old man shrieked: "You got me into this! You were the ideologue! I'm only a poor assassin!"

Nikolai said nothing. The machines seized and repossessed the old man's arms and legs.

19. ANTIQUE SPLITS. "You've really got it through you, right? All that old gigo stuff!" The young people spoke a slang-crammed jargon that Nikolai could barely comprehend. When they watched him their faces showed a mixture of aggression, pity, and awe. To Nikolai, they always seemed to be shouting. "I feel outnumbered," he murmured.

"You are outnumbered, old Nikolai! This bar is your museum, right? Your mausoleum! Give our ears your old frontiers, we're listening! Those idiot video technologies, those antique spirit splits. Mechs and Shapers, right? The wars of the coin's two halves!"

"I feel tired," Nikolai said. "I've drunk too much. Take me home, one of you."

They exchanged worried glances. "This is your home! Isn't it?"

20. EYES CLOSED. "You've been very kind," Nikolai told the two youngsters. They were Kosmosity archaeologists, dressed in their academic finery, their gowns studded with awards and medals from the Terraforming-Klusters. Nikolai realized suddenly that he could not remember their names.

"That's all right, sir," they told him soothingly. "It's now our duty to remember you, not vice versa." Nikolai felt embarrassed. He hadn't realized that he had spoken aloud.

"I've taken poison," he explained apologetically.

"We know," they nodded. "You're not in any pain, we hope?"

"No, not at all. I've done the right thing, I know. I'm very old. Older than I can bear." Suddenly he felt an alarming collapse within himself. Pieces of his con-

sciousness began to break off as he slid toward the yawning void. Suddenly he realized that he had forgotten his last words. With an enormous effort, he remembered them and shouted them aloud.

"Futility is freedom!" Filled with triumph, he died, and they closed his eyes.

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Bruce Sterling was born in 1954. His first publications were two novels, *Involution Ocean* (1977) and *The Artificial Kid* (1980). Since then he has started writing short stories, and his first two published stories were both nominated for Hugo Awards in 1983. His works have appeared in *F & SF*, *Universe* and *Omni*. He has lived in Madras, India, and in Austin, Texas. He is an ardent reader of the *New Musical Express*.

BACK ISSUES

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TISSUE ABLATION AND VARIANT REGENERATION

A Case Report

Michael Blumlein

At seven a.m. on Thursday Mr Reagan was wheeled through the swinging doors and down the corridor to operating room six. He was lying flat on the gurney, and his gaze was fixed on the ceiling; he had the glassy stare of a man in shock. I was concerned that he had been given analgesia, but the attendant assured me that he had not. As we were talking, Mr Reagan turned his eyes to me: the pupils were wide, dark as olives, and I recognized the dilation of pain and fear. I felt sympathy, but more, I was relieved that he had not inadvertently been narcotized, for it would have delayed the operation for days.

I had yet to scrub and placed my hand on his shoulder to acknowledge his courage. His skin was coarse beneath the thin sheet that covered him, as the pili erecti tried in vain to warm the chill we had induced. He shivered, which was natural, though eventually it would stop — it must — if we were to proceed with the surgery. I removed my hand and bent to examine the plastic bag that hung like a showy organ from the side of the gurney. There was nearly a litre of pale urine, which assured me that his kidneys were functioning well.

I turned away, and entering the scrub room, once more conceptualized our plan. There were three teams, one for each pair of extremities and a third for torso and viscera. I headed the latter, which was proper, as the major responsibility for this project was mine. We had chosen to avoid analgesia, the analeptic properties of excruciating pain being well known. There are several well-drawn studies that conclusively demonstrate the superior survival of tissues thus exposed, and I have cited these in a number of my own monographs. In addition, chlorinated hydrocarbons, which still form the bulk of our anesthetics, are tissue-toxic in extremely small quantities. Though these agents clear rapidly in the normal course of post-operative recovery, tissue propagation is too sensitive a phenomenon for us to have risked their use. The patient was offered, routinely, the choice of an eastern mode of

anesthesia, but he demurred. Mr Reagan has an obdurate faith in things American.

I set the timer above the sink and commenced to scrub. Through the window I watched as the staff went about the final preparations. Two large tables stood along one wall, and on top of them sat the numerous trays of instruments we would use during the operation. Since this was the largest one of its kind any of us at the center had participated in, I had been generous in my estimation of what would be needed. It is always best in such situations to err on the side of caution, and so I had ordered duplicates of each pack to be prepared and placed accessibly. Already an enormous quantity of instruments lay unpacked on the tables, divided into general areas of proximity. Thus, urologic was placed beside rectal and lower intestinal, and hepatic, splenic, and gastric were grouped together. Thoracic was separate, and orthopedic and vascular were divided into two groups for those teams assigned to the extremities. There were three sets of general instruments — hemostats, forceps, scissors, and the like — and these were on smaller trays that stood close to the operating table. Perched above them, and sorting the instruments chronologically, were the scrub nurses, hooded, masked, and gloved. Behind, and throughout the operating room circulated other, non-sterile personnel; these were principally nurses and technicians, who carefully avoided the sterile field being constructed about the perimeter of the operating table but otherwise roamed freely, thus functioning as the extended arm of the team.

For the dozenth time I scrubbed my cuticles and the space between fingernail and fingertip, then scoured both sides of my forearms to the elbow. The sheet had been removed from Mr Reagan, and his ventral surface — from neck to foot — was covered by the yellow suds of antiseptic. His pubic parts, chest, and axilla, had been shaved earlier, although he had no great plethora

of hair to begin with. The artificial light striking his body at that moment recalled to me the jaundiced hue I have seen at times on certain dysfunctional gall bladders, and I looked at my own hands. They seemed brighter, and I rinsed them several times, then backed into the surgical suite.

A nurse approached with a towel, whose corner I grabbed, proceeding to dry methodically each finger. She returned with a glove, spreading the entrance wide as one might the mouth of a fish in order to peer down its throat. I thrust my fingers and thumb into it and she snapped it upon my forearm. She repeated the exchange with the other, and I thanked her, then stood back and waited for the final preparations.

The soap had been removed from his skin, and now Mr Reagan was being draped with various-sized linens. Two of these were used to fashion a vertical barrier at the mid-point of his neck; behind this, with his head, sat the two anesthesiologists. Since no anesthetic was to be used, their responsibility lay in monitoring his respiratory and cardio-vascular status. He would be intubated, and they would make periodic measurements of the carbon dioxide and oxygen content of his blood.

I gave them a nod and they inserted the intracath, through which we would drip a standard, paralytic dose of succinylcholine. We had briefly considered doing without the drug, for its effect, albeit minimal, would still be noticeable on the ablated tissues. Finally, though, we had chosen to use it, reasoning — and experience proved us correct — that we could not rely on the paralysis of pain to immobilize the patient for the duration of the surgery. If there had been a lull, during which time he had chosen to move, hours of careful work might have been destroyed. Prudence dictated a conservative approach.

After initiating the paralytic, Dr Guevara, the senior anesthesiologist, promptly inserted the endotracheal tube. It passed easily for there was little, if any, muscular resistance. The respirator was turned on and artificial ventilation begun. I told Mr Reagan, who would be conscious throughout, that we were about to begin.

I stepped to the table and surveyed the body. The chest was exposed, as were the two legs, above which Drs Ng and Cochise were poised to begin.

"Scalpel," I said, and the tool was slapped into my palm. I transferred it to my other hand. "Forceps."

I bent over the body, mentally drawing a line from the sternal notch to the symphysis pubis. We had studied our approaches for hours, for the incisions were unique and had been used but rarely before. A procedure of this scale required precision in every detail in order that we preserve the maximal amount of viable tissue. I lifted the scalpel and with a firm and steady hand made the first cut.

He had been cooled in part to cause constriction of the small dermal vessels, thus reducing the quantity of blood lost to ooze. We were not, of course, able to use the electric scalpel to cut or coagulate, nor could we tie bleeding vessels, for both would inflict damage to tissue. Within reason, we had chosen planes of incision that avoided major dermal vasculature, and as I re-traced my first cut, pressing harder to separate the more stubborn fascial layers, I was re-assured by



paucity of blood that was appearing at the margins of the wound. I exchanged my delicate tissue forceps for a larger pair, everting the stratum of skin, fat, and muscle, and continuing my incision until I reached the costochondral junction in the chest and the linea alba in the belly. I made two lateral incisions, one from the pubis, along the inguinal ligament, ending near the anterior superior iliac spine, and the other from the sternal notch, along the inferior border of the clavicle to the anterior edge of the axilla. There was more blood appearing now, and for a moment I aided Dr Biko in packing the wound. Much of our success at controlling the bleeding depended, however, upon the speed at which I carried out the next stage, and with this in mind, I left him to mop the red fluid and turned to the thorax.

Pectus hypertrophicus occurs perhaps in one in a thousand; Billings, in a recent study of a dozen such cases, links the condition to a congenital aberration of the short arm of chromosome thirteen, and he postulates a correlation between the hypertrophied sternum, a marked preponderance of glabrous skin, and a mild associative cortical defect. He has studied these cases; I have not. Indeed, Mr Reagan's sternum was only the second in all my experience that would not yield to the Lebsche knife. I asked for the bone snips, and with the help of Dr Biko was finally able to split the structure. My forehead dripped from the effort, and a circulating nurse dabbed it with a towel.

I applied the wide-armed retractor, and as I ratcheted it apart, I felt a wince of resistance. I asked Dr Guevara to increase the infusion of muscle relaxant, for we were entering a most crucial part of the operation.

"His pupils are fixed and dilated," he announced.

I could see his heart, and it was beating normally. "His gases?" I asked.

"O₂ 85, CO₂, pH 7.37."

"Good," I said. "It's just agony then. Not death."

Dr Geuvara nodded above the barrier that separated us, and as he bent to whisper words of encouragement to Mr Reagan, I looked into the chest. There I paused, as I always seem to do at the sight of that glistening organ. It throbbed and rolled, sensuously, I thought, majestically, and I renewed my vows to treat it kindly. With the tissue forceps I lifted the pericardium and with the curved scissors punctured it. It peeled off smoothly, reminding me fleetingly of the delicate skin that encloses the tip of the male child's penis.

In rapid succession I ligated vena cava and cross-clamped the descending aorta, just distal to the bronchial arteries. We had decided not to use our bypass system, thus obviating cannulations that would have required lengthy and meticulous suturing. We had opted instead for a complete de-vascularization distal to the thoracic cavity, reasoning that since all the organs and other structures were to be removed anyway, there was no sense in preserving circulation below the heart. I signalled to my colleagues waiting at the lower extremities to begin their dissections.

I isolated the right subclavian artery and vein, ligated them, and did the same on the left. I anastomosed the internal thoracic artery to the ventral surface of the aortic arch, thus providing arterial flow to the chest wall, which we planned to preserve more or less intact.

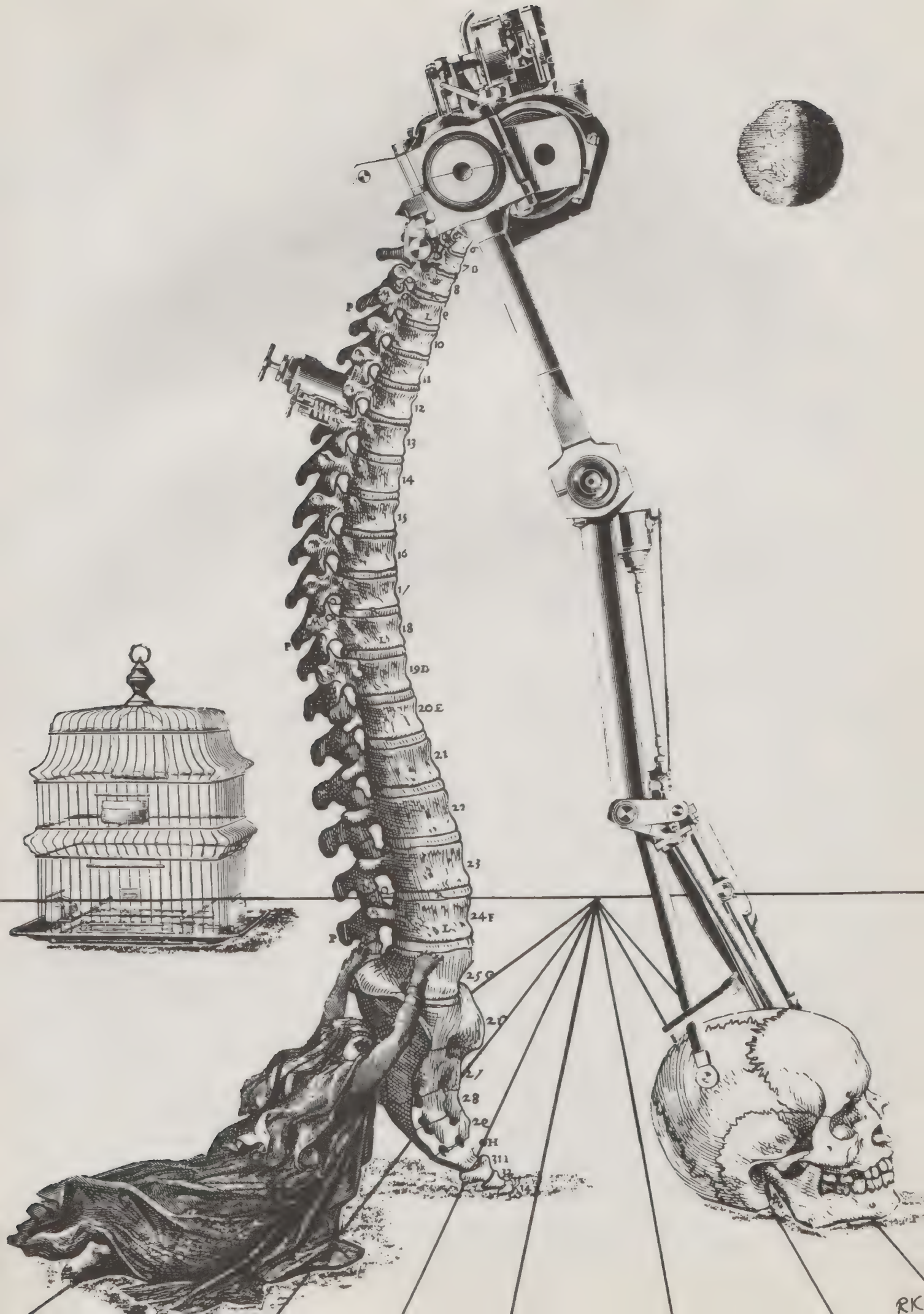
I returned to the descending aorta, choosing 3-0 Ethilon to assure occlusion of the lumen, and oversewed twice. I released the clamp slowly: there was no leakage, and I breathed a sigh of satisfaction. We had completed a crucial stage, isolating the thoracic and cephalic circulation from that of the rest of the body, and the patient's condition remained stable. What was left was the harvesting of his parts.

I would like to insert here a word on our behalf, our in the larger sense of not just the surgical team but the full technical and administrative apparatus. We had early on agreed that we must approach the dissection assiduously, meaning that in every case we would apply a greater, rather than a lesser, degree of scrupulousness. At the time of the operation no use — other than in transplantation — had been found for many of the organs we were to resect. Such parts as colon, spleen, and vasculature had not then, nor have they yet, struck utilitarian chords in our imaginations. Surely, they will in the future, and with this as our philosophy we determined to discard not even the most seemingly insignificant part. What could not immediately be utilized would be preserved in our banks, waiting for a bright idea to send it to the regeneration tanks.

It was for this reason, and this reason alone, that the operation lasted as long as it did. I would be lying if I claimed that Mr Reagan was not in constant and excruciating pain. Who would not be to have his skin fileted, his chest cracked, his limbs meticulously dissected and dismembered? In retrospect, I should have carried out a high transection of the spinal cord, thus interrupting most of the nerve fibers to his brain, but I did not think of it beforehand and during the operation was too occupied with other concerns. That he did survive is a testimony to his strength, though I still remember his post-operative shrieks and protestations. We had, of course, already detached his upper limbs, and therefore we ourselves had to dab the streams of tears that flowed from his eyes. At that point, there being no further danger of tissue damage, I did order an analgesic.

After I had successfully completed the de-vascularization procedure, thus removing the risk of life-threatening hemorrhage from our fields, I returned to the outer layer of thorax and abdomen. With an Adson forceps I gently retracted the thin sheet of dermis and began to undermine with the scalpel. It was painstaking, but after much time I finally had the entire area freed. It hung limp, drooping like a dewlap, and as I began the final axillary cut that would release it completely, I asked Ms Narciso, my scrub nurse, to call the technician. He came just as I finished, and I handed him the skin.

I confess that I have less than a full understanding of the technology of organ variation and regeneration. I am a surgeon, not a technologist, and devote the major part of my energies toward refinement and perfection of operative skills. We do, however, live in an age of great scientific achievement, and the iconoclasm of many of my younger colleagues has forced me to cast my gaze more broadly afield. Thus it is that I am not a complete stranger to inductive mitotics and controlled oncogenesis, and I will attempt to convey the fundamentals.



Upon receiving the tissue, the technician transports it to the appropriate room wherein lie the thermomagnetic protein baths. These are organ specific, distinguished by temperature, pH, magnetic field, and substrate, and designed to suppress cellular activity; specifically, they prolong dormancy at the G1 stage of mitosis. The magnetic field is altered then, such that each cell will arrange itself ninety degrees to it. A concentrated solution of isotonic nucleic and amino acids is then pumped into the tank, and the bath mechanically agitated to diffuse the solute. Several hours are allowed to pass, and the magnetic field is again shifted, attempting to align it with the nucleic loci that govern the latter stages of mitosis. If this is successful, and success is immediately apparent for failure induces rapid and massive necrosis, the organ system will begin to reproduce. This is a macroscopic phenomenon, obvious to the naked eye. I have been present at this critical moment, and it is a simple, yet wondrous, thing to behold.

Different organs regenerate, multiply, in distinctive fashion. In the case of the skin, genesis occurs quite like the polymerization of synthetic fibers, such as nylon and its congeners. The testes grow in a more sequential manner, analogous perhaps to the clustering of grapes along the vine. Muscles seem to laminate, forming thicker and thicker sheets until, if not separated, they collapse upon themselves. Bone propagates as tubules; ligaments, as lianoid strands of great length. All distinct, yet all variations on a theme.

In the case of our own patient, the outcome, I am pleased to report, was bounteous; this was especially gratifying in the light of our guarded prognostications. I was not alone in the skepticism with which I approached the operation, for the tissues and regenerative capacity of an old man are not those of a youngster. During the surgery, when I noticed the friability and general degree of degeneration of his organs, my thoughts were inclined rather pessimistically. I remember wondering, as Dr Cochise severed the humeral head from the glenoid fossa, inadvertantly crushing a quantity of porotic and fragile bone, if our scrupulous planning had not, perhaps, been a waste of effort, that the fruits of our labor would not be commensurate with our toil. Even now, with the benefit of hindsight, I remain astonished at our degree of success. As much as it is a credit, I believe, to the work of our surgical team, it is, perhaps more so, a tribute to the resilience and fundamental vitality of the human body.

After releasing the dermal layer as described, I proceeded to detach the muscles. The adipose tissue, so slippery and difficult to manipulate, would be removed chemically, thus saving valuable time. As I have mentioned, the risk of hemorrhage — and its threat to Mr Reagan's life — had been eliminated, but because of the resultant interruption of circulation we were faced with the real possibility of massive tissue necrosis. For this reason we were required to move most expeditiously.

With sweeping, but well guided, strokes of the scalpel I transected the ligamentous origins of Pectoralis Major and Minor, and Serratus Anterior. I located their points of insertion on the scapula and humerus and severed them as well, indicating to Ms Narciso that we would need the technician responsible for the muscles. She

replied that he had already been summoned by Dr Ng, and I took that moment to peer in his vicinity.

He and Dr Cochise had been working rapidly, already having completed the spiraling circumferential incisions from groin to toe, thus allowing, in a fashion similar to the peeling of an orange, the removal in toto of the dermal sheath of the leg. The anterior femoral and pelvic musculature had been exposed, and I could see the Sartorius and at least two of the Quadriceps heads dangling. This was good work and I nodded appreciatively, then turned my attention to the abdominal wall.

In terms of time the abdominal muscles presented less of a problem than the thoracic ones, for there were no ribs to contend with. In addition, as long as I was careful not to puncture the viscera, I could enter the peritoneum almost recklessly. I took my scalpel and thrust it upon the xiphoid, near what laymen call the solar plexus, and started the long and penetrating incision down the linea alba, past the umbilicus, to the symphysis pubis. With one hand I lifted the margin of the wound, and with the other delicately sliced the peritoneal membrane. I reflected all the abdominal muscles, the Rectus and Transversus Abdominis, the Obliquus Internus and Externus, and detached them from their bony insertions. Grasping the peritoneum with a long-toothed forceps and peeling it back, I placed two large towel clips in the overlying muscle mass, and then, as an iceman would pick up a block of ice, lifted it above the table, passing it into the hands of the waiting technician. Another was there for the thoracic musculature, and once these were cleared from the table, I turned to the abdominal contents themselves.

Let me interject a note as to the status of our patient at that time. As deeply as I become involved in the techniques and mechanics of any surgery, I am always, with another part of my mind, aware of the human being who lies at the mercy of the knife. At this juncture in our operation I noticed, by the flaccidity in the muscles on the other half of the abdomen, that the patient was perhaps too deeply relaxed. Always there is a tension in the muscles, and this must be mollified sufficiently to allow the surgeon to operate without undue resistance, but not so much that it endangers the life of the patient. In this case I noted little, if any, resistance, and I asked Dr Guevara to reduce slightly the rate of infusion of the relaxant. This affected all the muscles, including, of course, the diaphragm and those of the larynx, and Mr Reagan took the opportunity to attempt to vocalize. Being intubated, he was in no position to do so, yet somehow managed to produce a keening sound that unnerved us all. His face, as reported by Dr Guevara, became constricted in a horrible rictus, and his eyes seemed to convulse in their sockets. Clearly, he was in excruciating pain, and my heart flew to him as to a valiant soldier.

The agony, I am certain, was not simply corporeal; surely there was a psychological aspect to it, perhaps a psychosis, as he thought upon the systematic dissection and dismemberment of his manifest self. To me, I know it would have been unbearable, and once again I was humbled by his courage and fortitude. And yet there was still so much left to do; neither

empathy nor despair were distractions we could afford. Accordingly, I asked Dr Guevara to increase the infusion rate in order to still Mr Reagan's cries, and this achieved, I returned my concentration to the table.

By pre-arrangement Dr Biko now moved to the opposite side of the patient and began to duplicate there what I had just finished on mine. The sole modification was that he began on the belly wall and proceeded in a cephalad direction, so that by the time I had extirpated the contents of one half of the abdomen, the other would be exposed and ready. With alacrity I began the visceration.

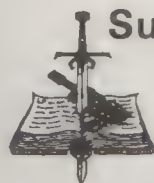
It would be tedious to chronicle step by step the various dissections, ligations, and severances; these are detailed in a separate monograph, whose reference can be found in the bibliography. Suffice it to say that I identified the organs and proceeded with the resections as we had planned. Once freeing the stomach, I was able to remove the spleen and pancreas without much delay; because of their combined mass, the liver and gall bladder required more time but eventually came out quite nicely. I reflected the proximal small and large intestines downward in order to lay bare the deeper recesses of the upper abdominal cavity and to have access to the kidneys and adrenals. I treated gland and organ as a unit, removing each pair together, transecting the ureters high, near the renal pelvices. The big abdominal vessels, vena cava and aorta, were now exposed, and I had to withstand the urge to include them in my dissection. We had previously agreed that this part of the procedure would be assumed by Dr Biko, who is as skilled and renowned a vascular surgeon as I am an abdomino-thoracic one, and though they lay temptingly now within my reach, I resisted the lure and turned to accomplish the extirpation of the alimentary tract.

We did not, as many had urged, remove the cavitous segment of the digestive apparatus as a whole. After consultation with our technical staff we determined that it would be more practical — successful — if we proceeded segmentally. Thus, we divided the tract into three parts: stomach, including the esophageal segment just distal to the diaphragm; small intestine, from pylorus to ileo-cecal valve; and colon, from cecum to anus. These were dutifully resected and sent to the holding banks, where they await future purpose and need.

As I harvested the internal abdominal musculature, the Psoas, Iliacus, Quadratus Lumborum, I let my mind wander for a few moments. We were nearing the end of the operation, and I felt the luxury of certain philosophical meditations. I thought about the people of the world, the hungry, the cold, those without shelter or goods to meet the exigencies of daily life. What are our responsibilities to them, we the educated, the skilled, the possessors? It is said, and I believe, that no man stands above any other; what then can one person do for the many? Listen, I suppose. Change.

I have found in my profession, as I am certain exists in all others, that to not adapt is to become obsolete. There are many I have known, many of my colleagues, who, unwilling or unable to grapple with innovation, have gone the way of the penny. Tenacity, in some an admirable quality, is no substitute for the ability to

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change, for what in one age might be considered tenacious in another would most certainly be called cowardly. I thought upon our patient, whose fortunes had so altered since the years of my training, and considered further the question of justice. Could an act of great altruism, albeit forced and involuntary, balance a generation of infamy? How does the dedication of one's own body to the masses weigh upon the scales of sin and repentance?

My brow furrowed, for these questions were far more difficult to me than the operation itself, and had it not been for Ms Narciso, who spoke up in a timely voice, I might have broken the sterile field by wiping with my own hand the perspiration on my forehead.

"Shall we move to the pelvis, Doctor?" she said, breaking my reverie.

"Yes," I countered, turning momentarily from the table to recover, while a nurse mopped the moist skin of my face.

The bladder, of course, had been decompressed by the catheter that had been passed prior to surgery, and once I pierced the floor of the peritoneum, it lay beneath my blade like a flat and flaccid tire. I severed it quickly, taking care to include the prostate, seminal vesicles, ureters, and membranous urethra in the resection. A technician carried these to an intermediate room, where a surgeon was standing by to separate the structures before they were taken to their respective tanks. What remained was to take the penis, which was relatively simple, and testes, which required more care so as not to disrupt the delicate turnica that surrounded them. This done, I straightened

my back for perhaps the first time since we began and assessed our progress.

When one becomes so engrossed in a task, so keyed and focused that huge chunks of time pass unaware, it is a jarring feeling, akin to waking from a vivid and lifelike dream, to return to reality. I have felt this frequently during surgeries, but never as I did this time. Hours had passed, personnel had changed, perhaps even the moon outside had risen, in a span that for me was marked in moments. I looked for Drs Ng and Cochise and was informed that they had left the surgical suite some time ago; I recalled this only dimly, but when I looked to their work was pleased to find that it had been performed most adequately. All limbs were gone, and the glenoid fossae, where the shoulders had been de-articulated, were sealed as we had discussed. Across from me Dr Biko was just completing the abdominal vascular work. I nodded to myself, and using an interior approach, detached the muscles of the lumbar spine, then asked for the bone saw.

We transected the spinal cord between the second and third lumbar vertebrae, thus preserving the major portion of attachments of the diaphragm. This, of

course, was vital, if, as we had planned, Mr Reagan was to retain the ability to respire. It is well-known that those who leave surgery still attached to the respirator, which surely would have been the case if we had been sloppy in this last part of the operation, do poorly thereafter, often dying in the immediate post-operative period. In this case especially, such an outcome would have been particularly heinous, for it would have deprived this brave man of the fate and rewards most deservedly his.

I am nearing the conclusion of our report, and it must be obvious that I have failed to include each and every nerve, ligament, muscle, and vessel that we removed; if it seems a critical error, I can only say that it is a purposeful one, intended to improve the readability of this document. Hopefully, I have made it more accessible to the lay that exist outside the cloister of our medical world, but those who crave more detailed information I refer to the *Archives of Ablative Technique*, vol. 113, number 6, pp. 67-104, or, indeed, to any comprehensive atlas of anatomy.

We sealed the chest wall and sub-diaphragmatic area with a synthetic polymer (XRO 137, by Dow) that is thin but surprisingly durable and impervious to bacterial invasion. We did a towel count to make certain that none were inadvertently left inside the patient, though at that point there was little of him that could escape our attention, then Dr Guevara inserted the jugular catheter that would be used for nourishment and medication. Dr Biko fashioned a neat little fistula from the right external carotid artery, which, because we had taken the kidneys, would be used for dialysis. These completed, we did a final blood gas and vital sign check, each of which was acceptable, and I stepped back from the table.

"Thank you all very much," I said, and turned to Mr Reagan as I peeled back my gloves. He was beginning to recover from the drug-induced paralysis, and his face seemed to recoil from mine as I bent toward him. I have seen this before in surgery, where the strange apparel, the hooded and masked faces, often cause fright in a patient. It is especially common in the immediate post-operative period, when unusual bodily sensations and a frequently marked mental disorientation play such large roles. I was therefore not alarmed to see our patient's features contort as I drew near.

"It is over," I said gently, keeping my words simple and clear. "It went well. We will take the tube from your mouth, but don't try to talk. Your throat will be quite sore for awhile, and it will hurt."

I placed a hand on his cheek, which felt clammy even though the skin was flushed, and Dr Guevara withdrew the tube. By that time the muscle relaxant had worn off completely, and Mr Reagan responded superbly by beginning to breathe on his own immediately. Shortly thereafter, he began to shriek.

There are some surgeons I know, and many other physicians, who believe in some arcane manner in the strengthening properties of pain. They assert that it fortifies the organism, steeling it, as it were, to the insults of disease. Earlier, I mentioned the positive association between pain and tissue survival, but this obtains solely with respect to ablative surgery. It has not been demonstrated under myriad other circum-

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stances, and this despite literally hundreds of studies to prove it so. The only possible conclusion, the only scientific one, is that pain, apart from its value as a mechanism of warning, has none of those attributes the algophilists ascribe to it. In my mind these practitioners are reprehensible moralists and should be barred from those specialties, such as surgery, where the problem is ubiquitous.

Needless to say, as soon as Mr Reagan began to cry, I ordered a potent and long-lasting analgesic. For the first time since we began his face quieted and his eyes

closed, and though I never questioned him on it, I like to think that his dreams were sweet and proud at what he, one man, had been able to offer thousands.

Save for the appendix, this is the whole of my report. Once again I apologize for omissions and refer the interested reader to the ample bibliography. We have demonstrated, I believe, the viability of extensive tissue ablation and its value in providing substrate for inductive and variant mitotics. Although it is an arduous undertaking, I believe it holds promise for selected patients in the future.

Appendix

As of the writing of this document, the following items and respective quantities have been produced by our regeneration systems:

Item	Source	Quantity
Oil, refined	Testes: seminiferous tubules	3761 liters
Perfumes and scents	Same	162 grams
Meat, including patties, filets, and ground round	Muscles	13,318 kilograms
Storage jugs	Bladder	2732
Balls, inflatable (recreational use)	Same	325
Cord, multi-purposed	Ligaments	1.2 kilometers
Roofing material, e.g. for tents; flexible siding	Skin: full thickness	3.6 sq. kilometers
Prophylactics	Skin: stratum granulosum	18,763 cartons of 10 each
Various enzymes, medications, hormones	Pancreas Adrenal Glands Hepatic Tissue	272 grams
Flexible struts and housing supports	Bone	453 sq. meters

The vast majority of these have been distributed, principally to countries of the third world, but also to impoverished areas of our own nation. A follow-up study to update our data and provide a geographical breakdown by item will be conducted within the year.

Michael Blumlein is a licensed physician who has assisted in many surgeries, although the only ones he performs now are imaginary. He lives in San Francisco, where he has been writing "more or less full-time" for over a year. "Tissue Ablation..." is his first short story to be accepted for professional publication. He has recently completed a novel, *The Movement of Mountains*, "which deals with memory, disease, transformation." Asked about how he came to write "Tissue Ablation...", he replies: "What market did I have in mind when I wrote the story? Any, though I honestly couldn't imagine any of the major American F and SF magazines taking it. I thought, perhaps, that it might be published as a satire in some progressive periodical (for example *Mother Jones*); I'm much

happier that it ended up in *Interzone*." Questioned about the possible influence of J.G. Ballard (vide the latter's little-known piece in *Ambit*, "Mae West's Reduction Mammoplasty"), Michael Blumlein says: "I have read many of Ballard's short stories, though none of his 'imaginary operation' ones. It's curious that you should mention him: I read 'Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan', and while it was not the impetus for my story it encouraged me not to hold back my feelings. There are plenty of censors in the world and, at least as a writer, it's best to let them have their say after you've written and not before. I'm not sure that the pen is mightier than the sword, but at the moment it's the best I can do."

IN REVIEW

New Worlds: An Anthology ed. Michael Moorcock
(Fontana/Flamingo, £3.50).

New Worlds existed as a magazine under Michael Moorcock's editorship (usually) from 1964 to 1970; it continued to appear in paperback as an occasional "original" anthology from 1971 to 1976. This large retrospective volume draws on that whole 12-year period, and it's probably as near as we'll ever get to a definitive NW anthology. It contains fiction, verse, articles and reviews, as well as contents listings of all issues of NW. It's worth getting for Moorcock's long introduction alone — a fascinating account of the excitements and heartbreaks of the whole NW experience. Interzone readers who are too young to have tasted NW in its day should turn to this book for the authentic flavour. Some of the fiction (by Aldiss, Ballard, Bayley, Disch, Harrison, Sladek, etc.) may be familiar, but there's much in here that you won't have encountered before. It's a vitally important volume and one that has been long overdue. (DP)

Ararat by D.M. Thomas (Gollancz, £6.95)

This side of Ararat, we to and fro in a labyrinth of stories. None ends. It is difficult or impossible to identify the teller. This may or may not describe our secular benighted world before the flood. It is surely a way of beginning to describe D.M. Thomas's new novel. *Ararat* is a Russian doll out of Escher, stories within stories but you end up with a bigger story than the frame you began with, and there is no return (the stories within the stories do not precisely end, nor do we know who tells them) because *Ararat* lies ahead, somewhere beyond the text, much of which is told (or seems to be told) upon the world-encompassing Ocean. *Ararat* comprises (when they can be found) hints of aesthetic joys, tribunals, copies — like the translation of Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights* and Thomas's own ("own") completion of the tale. The book as a whole is a fabulation about the nature of fabulation. It is very cunning, a hermit in a coat of many colours. Its characters, who are telling each other tales, are makers of fiction in their own ("own") lives. The book is not easy to follow, perhaps impossible to. It is all interstices and gaps. The maze, the coat of many colours, which we are left with, like hermit pheromone, calls us onward to some Sacred Grove of art. But *Ararat* lies only beyond the text. We never get there.

A good read.

(JC)

Tales I Told My Mother (Marion Boyars, £3.95)

The Facts of Life and Other Fictions (Hamish Hamilton, £7.95)
by Robert Nye

Bric-a-brac and Balderdash! Bosh, Tosh and Hogwash! Guinea Pig Tea! A Cornucopia of Codswallop! Here are Chang the Chinese Giant, Mary Murder and the Wandering Jew. Mr Nye exposes the Pre-Raphaelite Mafia and dust off the skull of Ben Jonson. A Memorable Fancy: The Welsh Discovery of

America. Revealed: Edinburgh the same place as Jerusalem! Reputations Inflated and Curiosities Inflam'd! Sappho's Breasts and Chatterton's Pox! Lord Fox and His Victim! Lady Haystack and Her Hermit! Wm. Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway: The Truth. Gertrude Stein and D.H. Lawrence, call'd Lorenzo: The Lies. Who threw Fortescue into Lord Tennyson's Brook? How did Friar Goat cure the Whooping Cough of Adam Kadmon? Wild-Geese Chas'd, Mares Nested, Mice Toasted. A Cock, a Bull and a Snake in the Grass. The Abomination of the Phosphor Match. The Nobel Prize Plot and the Guilty Secret of Rudyard Kipling. First Editions and Last Laughs. *Unhooded*: the Sole Member of the Autonomous Pan-SophiE Prussian Order of Illuminated Friars Minor Conventual of St Francis. God and the Virgin Mary. Spike Langdon's Dad and the Au Pair Girl. The Boyhood of Raleigh in One Thousand Two Hundred and Fifty Pieces. Flim-Flam, Fiddle-Faddle and Fibs! WITH, on this Occasion Only: Mrgad, Quantum Controller in the Third Galaxy, meets Visakha of Tibet, to the accompaniment of Musics by the Interplanetary Composer Mozart. All in Choicest English most Cunningly Express'd. (CG)

Atlas Anthology One ed. Alastair Brotchie (£2.60 + p&p from 10 Park St., London S.E.1)

Claude Migrel the misanthrope attributed the failure of his earlier noble aspirations to the incompatibility of low birth and high education. He adopted the orphan of a widowed cousin, but bearing in mind his own suffering, wished to make of his ancestral dependant an untroubled illiterate.

He carefully chose for his governess an impassive sheep.

And Jacques, under the care of Eveline, grew up a great distance from the alphabet.

This was a shame, because Jacques was thereby deprived of enjoying this "new periodical collection of non-naturalistic prose". He could not consider his reply to Erik Satie, who asks us, "What do you prefer: Music or the Pork Trade?" Nor could he take warning from Jonathan Martin ("Your sinsear Frend"). He could not benefit from Harry Mathews' letters on the Sinking of the Odradek Stadium ("Finally, the gnome left, with whispered words that sounded like 'Beware of green wolves!'"); nor from Montagu O'Reilly's edifying exposé of the Depraved Piano of the Nevski Prospect ("There could be only one conclusion: the servant had magnetized with his teeth the steel keys.").

How empty to Jacques would be the pathos of Alfred Jarry's "The Other Alceste" ("Blinded, I stumble in the boat of the one-armed swordsman, whose right arm bleeds to my left and nourishes the metallic beasts of the dead marshes."). How vain the terror of Franz Held's "The Golden Bomb" ("The other nineteen pairs of eyelids just twitch quietly at first").

Ah, Jacques, has your unfortunate father not pulled the wool over your eyes? Are you sleeping, Brother Jacques? Will you not obey the Alphabetical Order? Consider Malcolm Green's cowboy, reading the Secret of the Universe in Alphabet Soup. Jacques, can you be sure that soup was not made from a mutton-bone? (CG)

LETTERS

Dear *Interzone*

A few words about No 5:—

Scott Bradfield writes well. "The Flash! Kid" hovers crazily along the edge of traditional hard sf and a new, vague fantasy. I'm surprised this is only his first published story. Definitely more.

Richard Cowper's "The Tithonium Factor" was beautifully done: definitely a piece for anthologies. "Vitamin Memories" has no value that I can understand. The pictures may induce fantasies, but I'm afraid Mr Greenland's response to them left me uninspired.

"Novelty" by John Crowley captured very well, I thought, the gestation pains of writing, but it didn't smell of sf or fantasy, not the least bit, so why in *Interzone*?

John Shirley's "What Cindy Saw" was so beautifully ambiguous — are we reading of Cindy's hallucination or our own blindness? — that I read it with unflagging interest.

M. John Harrison can write very well and I read his "Strange Great Sins" fairly slowly, but even so it slipped through my cranium somewhere and I didn't know what I'd read at the end. My fault.

Eric C. Williams

Haywards Heath, Sussex

Dear *Interzone*

Yes! Yes! More Scott Bradfield stories please!

Nic Howard

Reading, Berkshire

Dear *Interzone*

No. 5 I thought a distinctive and distinguished issue; and Richard Cowper's "The Tithonian Factor" a remarkable tour de force, creating an emotional aura reminiscent of Kipling's "They", without appearing in any way derivative. I had more reservations about No. 6. The "fantasy" and "psychological" wings of imaginative writing can more easily become undisciplined than the sf wing, and I found the embroidering of some of the stock motifs of fantasy (Marilyn and baroque decadence among them) a shade wearisome and repetitious. I have experienced Norman Spinrad's Badlands, etc., more powerfully than I did those of Keith Roberts, greatly as I appreciate his style — as I do that of Cherry Wilder. Her story was the gem of No. 6, though she makes the mistake of piling synchronicity on synchronicity on synchronicity, with diminishing returns in terms of impact.

Perhaps I'm being somewhat captious; but actually her short autobiographical essay caught my imagination as strongly, or even more strongly, than her story; and for my money the liveliest (sf) image in the whole issue was contained in her sentence: "New Zealand, that temperate jewel, and Australia, its giant neighbour, were both wracked (sic) by storms that originated in other galaxies..."

Kenneth Bailey

Alderney

Dear *Interzone*

The latest IZ (number 6) arrived this morning — a first-class issue, really a radical leap forward. The general feel and appearance are those of a true professional magazine. The cover is excellent, in a way the sort of thing I was hoping for from the start — a striking and original image that taps so much more of our vague dread of science, machines and the modern world than the classic sf imagery of dragons and spaceships (incidentally, the reader who commends you for not looking like a NATO first-strike document has got it the wrong way round, those are the real fears and dreams of our time...). But it looks very good, the Roger Dean piece in particular. Keep up the good work.

J.G. Ballard

Shepperton, Middlesex

Dear *Interzone*

I live in San Francisco and saw *Interzone* first at a small bookstore (Fantasy, Etc) that specializes in fantasy and science fiction. As far as I know it is the only place in the city that sells the magazine.

It's a pity that it is not more widely available. Along with two or three friends who read it, I consider *Interzone* probably the best magazine in the field right now. I'm not interested in a magazine that regurgitates mainstream values, visions, emotions, politics, etc., and your commitment seems to be otherwise. Although I don't like all the stories you publish, I like many of them. You seem to be looking forward rather than backward.

Keep up the good work. I hope soon all our bookstores will be stocking *Interzone*...

Michael Blumlein

San Francisco, California

Dear *Interzone*

I'm definitely encouraged to see a quality-oriented "sf" magazine such as *Interzone* being published in the UK. It's been far too long since writers on your side of the pond have had a quality publication in which to present their new works unhindered by the too often myopic demands of sf magazines in the US. UK writers work in a tradition that's significantly different to that which applies here, and I'm much in favor of that difference even when stories from there don't suit my US-influenced tastes. *Interzone* does provide encouragement for variety in science-fiction writing, which I believe is crucial to the continuing development of the genre. I hope the magazine will have a long and prosperous life.

(You will probably know me as the editor of *The Best Science Fiction of the Year*...)

Terry Carr

Oakland, California

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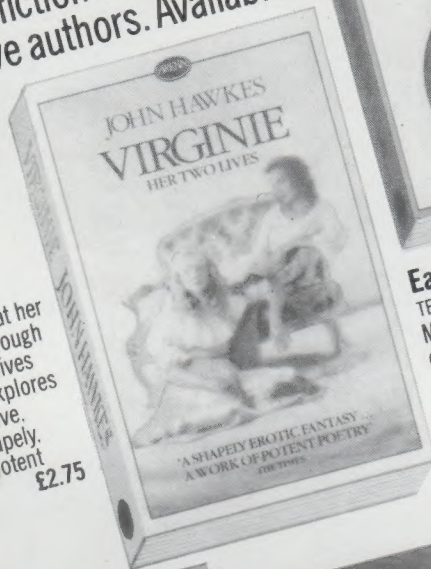
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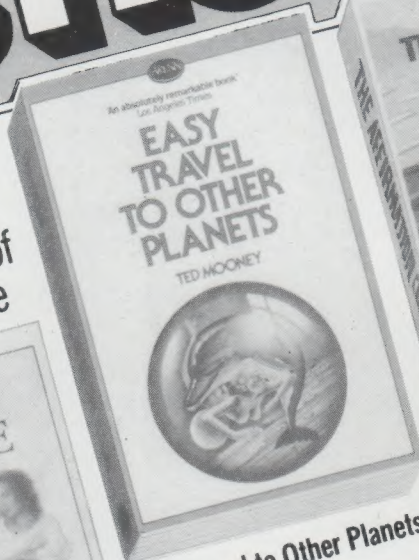
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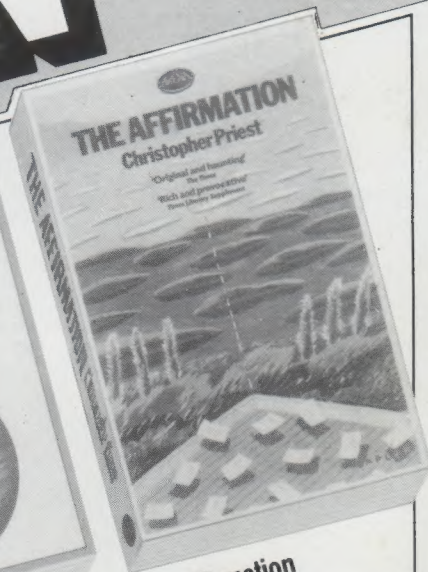
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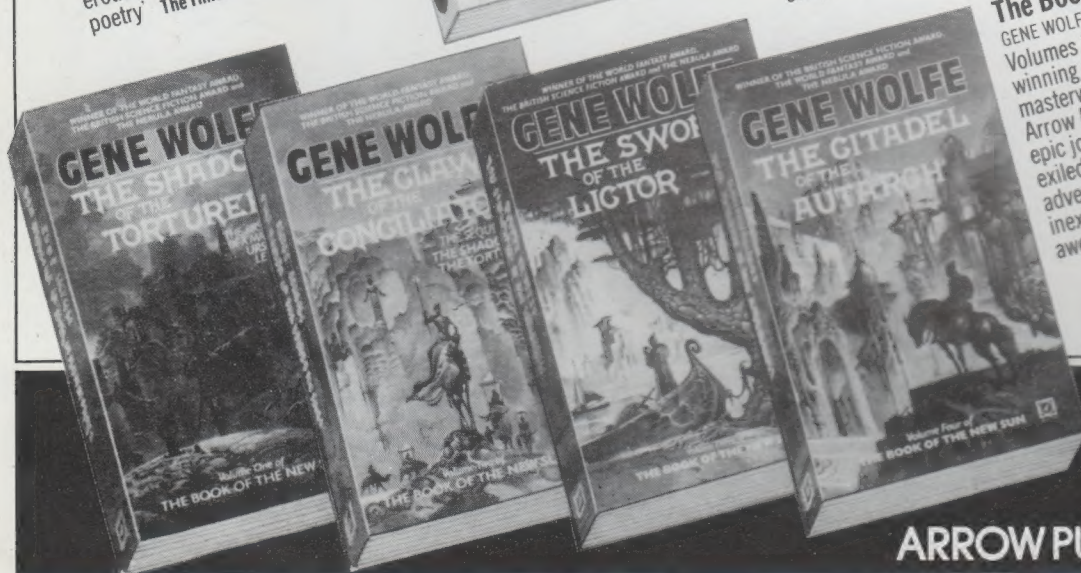
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